

FELINE AGGRESSION

What is Feline Aggression?

We have all had a cat in our lives that seemed to be a bit of a “Jekyll and Hyde” - purring and adorable one minute, fiend wrapped around our wrist trying furiously to shred skin the next. Perhaps it was a cat that would launch at you from behind furniture or ambush from beneath the stairs.



In many cases, this so-called “aggression” is normal play behaviour. It reflects partly inter-cat behaviour but much of it is practicing hunting behaviours, which is very normal for this species. Kittens often pounce on each other, grasping with their forelimbs, kicking with their hind and biting anything within reach. They learn from their littermates and their mother what is acceptable and what is not. Kittens that are removed from their feline families before the age of 8 - 12 weeks will not learn how to inhibit this behaviour to acceptable levels. Often, this is complicated even further by well-meaning owners who playfully “rough up” the kitten, as they can

inflict little damage to a human while they still weigh less than a kilo. Once they grow into a cat that weighs on average around 3-6 kg, they will then still expect that the same behaviour they have been taught - often by us - is acceptable. Now, however, it is no longer so cute.

Some cats, particularly the ones that are enjoying a nice pat until the moment they turn around and bite, scratch, swat, hiss or growl, may actually simply be frustrated that we humans are such rubbish at speaking cat. Cat body language is very subtle. A shift in position, an ear flick, a turn of the head, a ripple in the coat or tail twitch can all be signals that the cat has had enough pats now and is politely asking you to refrain. Because they are so subtle and vary slightly for each cat, we often miss these signals. For the cat, it is akin to having that annoying sibling who keeps poking you in the arm until you can't stand it anymore and yell for Mum. They don't have Mum to come to the rescue, so they do the only thing left to them - let you know in the most blatantly obvious way they can that they've had enough. Many owners describe this behaviour as “going schizo” or “turning mean”.

So what do you do if you have a cat that is exhibiting these behaviours, or how do you prevent a new kitten from learning them?

The truth of the matter is that cats are complicated creatures therefore there are no guaranteed “cures”. However, there are some steps you can take to retrain a cat exhibiting these behaviours. The same steps will help prevent a kitten from learning them too.

A Human is Not a Toy

The first step your cat needs to learn is that human beings (and their body parts) are not toys. To teach them this, never ever use parts of your body to encourage play from your cat or kitten. Hands, feet, fingers and toes must never be used as the focus of a “game”. Instead roll a toy for your cat to chase, or utilise one of the many “fishing rod” toys available. You can even make your own by tying a feather or a small toy to the end of a piece of string and dangling it before your cat.

Movement triggers a cat’s hunting behaviours, so pulling away from such behaviours in surprise or hurt only encourages it. Tough as it is, try to keep your body as still as possible and deflect the cat’s attention by using a dangled, rolled or waving toy.

It’s a Wonderful World

Cats are highly intelligent creatures, a fact that is sometimes overlooked by their owners. They grow bored and restless just as quickly as a dog, particularly if they are young. This can sometimes lead to them escalating their play behaviours to unacceptable levels. Your cat will be happy enough to leave you alone if they have more interesting things to do that do not involve your body parts. You can provide lots of interest in your cat’s world fairly easily, and without spending a lot of money. Try these tips:

- ✿ Don’t feed them in one place all the time. Instead, try hiding dry food pellets inside toilet rolls or in the bottom of a partly open egg carton and station them at random around your house, not too far from their original feeding station first, then move the stations further and further away.
- ✿ Place water stations in several locations around the house. This does not mean you need to have bowls everywhere. A table water feature or a heavy based plastic tumbler on a shelf or sideboard will be sufficient.
- ✿ Ensure your cat has plenty of hiding places and high resting places. Do not disturb your cat if he or she is in their hiding place. They will be happier if you pretend you can’t even see them.
- ✿ Create a play station out of a cardboard box by cutting holes at random in the top and sides, then place toys or treats inside it that will challenge the cat to try and fish them out. It may take them a little while to get the hang of it, so don’t give up if they don’t seem to use it right away.
- ✿ Provide toys that allow your cat to exhibit all their natural behaviours safely: stalking, ambushing, hunting, swatting, climbing, scratching and even carrying small objects about in their mouth.
- ✿ Make time to play safe games with your cat every day. This will go a long way to helping your cat remain calm and friendly.



Enough is Enough

The most frightening and aggressive thing one cat can do to another is stare directly at it with wide open eyes and reach out a paw. Unfortunately, these are the very same things we humans do when reaching for something we love!! If you have a cat that seems to be friendly one minute and a terror the next, it could be that you and the cat just aren’t communicating. Hard as it may be, you may need to resist the impulse to reach for your beloved feline friend and wait instead for your cat to ask for attention. Try ignoring them more - don’t even make eye contact - and you may find your cat is suddenly calmer and friendlier. This is exactly the reason so many people who aren’t fond of cats find that cats seem to like them!

Bear in mind that one quick pass by your legs is not necessarily a request for a cat. It might be the equivalent of your cat saying “hi”. Prolonged petting - or unwelcome petting - may cause your cat to unexpectedly turn on you as he or she may have given you signals that enough was enough that you didn’t even realise were signals.

Wait for the times your cat rubs against with more determination and then reward it with a little attention. Keep the petting session fairly brief, so you will be able to cease before the cat becomes annoyed. If the cat asks for more, reward him or her with a few more pats and again, stop well before the cat reacts negatively.

There can be many, many other reasons why cats may exhibit anti-social or apparently aggressive behaviours. If you are at all in doubt about the cause of your cat’s behaviour, or how best to manage it, you should contact our Behaviour Helpline or ask your vet for a referral to a cat behaviour specialist for help.

