



Cat Aggression toward People

The first step with any behavioral issue is to take your cat to the veterinarian for a full evaluation. Cats are very stoic animals and will hide illness and injury. Sometimes our only clue that something is physically wrong is a behavioral symptom. Many behavioral modification programs can begin in conjunction with or shortly after your trip to the veterinarian.

Cat aggression towards a family member or friend can be very disheartening and sometimes frightening, especially if there is a sudden change in your cat's behavior. Changes like this need to be taken seriously, and should be addressed immediately to prevent the issue from becoming a bigger problem. Aggression against a human is related to the human's behavior.

Types of Aggression

Play Aggression

When cats play, they are going through their prey drive sequence. Their instinct is to find prey, hunt the prey, catch the prey and kill the prey. When cats have this type of aggression, they need to be redirected to appropriate toys and taught that people are not toys. When cats are very young, playtime is their way of learning how to hunt and catch prey. If a kitten is raised without its Mother or siblings, they lose out on learning how to do this properly. Mom and siblings will correct each other if play becomes too rough! If that kitten is not properly socialized by humans as to what is and isn't appropriate to play with, it can often become difficult later on to change the behavior. Also, if rough play between a human and a cat occurs, the aggressive behavior is encouraged. This includes wiggling fingers or hands close to a cat's face. It may seem cute when they are little, but as they grow up, it becomes a serious problem. Most times, the aggression is taken out on hands or feet because of their movement.

Redirecting play to appropriate toys involves good timing and a toy your cat won't resist. Cat Wand toys such as Da Bird or the Cat Charmer are wonderful because most cats love the movements of them, and you can hold them away from you at a safe distance. If your cat prefers toys such as a mouse or a ball, tossing the toy away from you before the cat is about to strike will redirect him or her. Praise and the reward of a favorite treat immediately afterwards will help to reinforce the appropriate behavior. Some cats are just bored and will require long play sessions, especially if the aggression is occurring before or at bedtime.

Petting Aggression

Some cats love to be petted for long periods of time. Some, however, do not. Some have a "time limit", and it varies from cat to cat. There also might be specific areas on the cat's body that s/he prefers not to be touched often or at all. Disregarding your cat's preference for being touched can result in you receiving a

bite or a scratch. There are usually signs to warn you before the bite or scratch occurs – a flicking tail, ears rotated back or flattening, maybe a light swat, or even an air nip. Respect these signals; your cat is trying to communicate with you. When your cat gives these signals, STOP. Trying to soothe your cat by touching them one more time isn't what s/he wants. Your cat simply wants you to STOP. Do not punish your cat if s/he does nip, bite, swat or scratch. Both of you want pleasant interactions to enjoy together. Punishment can result in the aggression escalating, a loss of trust, or even fear.

If you want to work on prolonging interactions with your cat, use positive reinforcement methods such as providing a treat before petting, and even after petting (as long as your cat is not giving off any signals that you should stop). *See also the article on Training Your Cat Using Positive Reinforcement Methods.*

Fearful/Defensive Aggression

Cats displaying fearful or defensive aggression may attack if touched. Fearful cats are often hiding, pupils are dilated, crouched low, slinking. Defensive cats will often be sitting or standing, ready to lash out. Both might be hissing, spitting, or growling. If your own cat is displaying any of these behaviors, please seek professional help by first contacting your Veterinarian to rule out any medical issues. If medical issues are ruled out, then seek the help from a professional trained in Cat Behavior. *See also the article on Reducing Fearful Behavior.*

Redirected Aggression

Redirected aggression occurs when the cat's senses are heightened to the point that they are only focused on that object (it could be a person, an animal), and if interacted with in anyway at that moment, the cat redirects aggressively. *See also the article Cats in Conflict.*

Resource/Territory Aggression

Cats have their favorite spots in their home and often work out elaborate time-sharing programs. When a new cat is bought in to the family, this can result in resource-related aggression while resources are reallocated. However, sometimes the aggressive cat has designated a particular person to block from favorite resting spots. They do this by stalking, swatting, staring at, blocking, or biting that person.

If the aggressive behavior occurs while your cat is in your lap, immediately stand up (hands off the cat) and your cat will have no choice but to get off your lap. If the aggression occurs at other time, keep a toy in your pocket and if you sense the cat is going to attack, toss the toy away from you (make sure it's a favorite toy and have several on hand). When the cat goes after the toy AND continues to leave you alone, toss a treat over as a reward. If the cat chases after the toy, but then immediately comes back towards you, toss another toy.

If after trying these suggestions you are still experiencing undesirable behaviors in your cat, SUBMIT QUESTIONS by clicking the link under Ask A Trainer on the Behavior and Training page of the Wayside Waifs website: www.waysidewaifs.org.