



# Cats in Conflict: Feline Social Behavior

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*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.*

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Cats are socially selective creatures, which means that they do not need each other to survive but they will choose to socialize with each other. Cats are individuals with personalities and because of this they will get along with certain cats and not others. For how to properly introduce or re-introduce your cats see *the article on Introducing a New Cat*.

Most people miss the subtle way cats communicate with each other and only start to notice problems when a fight occurs. Often times there are other signs that things are getting tense between your cats. One of the other signs is not using the litter box. *See also the article on Litter Box Problems*. Cats have elaborate ways to share territory and disruptions to their agreements can disturb the delicate balance. When these problems arise it is important to address them as soon as possible. The more fighting that occurs the more difficult it will be to resolve. Cat do not “just work things out” once they get into a pattern of fighting. This process will take time and commitment to resolve and you may need the help of a behavior specialist. Pay close attention to all your cats’ behaviors and document your findings. Be patient as each cat will progress at their own pace. Use the following information to help you evaluate the situation.

## **Territory and access to resources**

Territory is one of the most important things in your cat’s life. Territory aggression can occur when a new cat is brought into the home, when a cat reaches social maturity (usually around the age of 2 or 3), when one cat comes home from the vet or if the cats view their resources as insufficient to share. The behaviors you might see include chasing, swatting, hitting or ambushing. You might also notices one cat sits directly in the path of the litter box or food bowl or waits outside the litter box to attack as the other cat tries to leave the area. Other signs your cats might be having territory disagreements would be having stare downs, posturing and moving slowly while starting, blocking access to food and water, finding alternate locations to urinate or defecate, marking the perimeter of the home or major walkways(face rubbing, scratching or spraying), or one cat always leaves a room when another walks into the room. Many of these signals go unnoticed so as the owner you may have to play detective. *See also the articles on Litter Box Problems and Setting up the Environment for Your Cat*.

## **Redirected aggression**

Redirected aggression happens when your cat is frustrated that it cannot attack something and he will turn and attack the closest cat (or human) he can. A neighbor cat visiting your yard, for example, could make your cat upset about his territory being invaded. Since he cannot get out and attack the stranger in the yard he will take that energy and anger out on his housemate. Cats will also redirect onto humans or anything moving (like a housemate) if they haven't had enough play time. *See also the article on Aggression to People.* There is also the potential for a redirection if your cat is suddenly startled and attacks the closest thing to him out of fear.

## **Defensive aggression**

When a cat feels that he cannot escape from an attack he will choose to either freeze or fight. The defensive cat will hiss, growl or scream to keep the attacker away. He will fall to the ground, show his teeth, pull his ears and whiskers back and get his paws in the air ready for protection. What can happen in multi-cat homes is a cycle of behaviors. We often will not know the original incident that starts the cycle so it may take some investigation. When one cat is attacked over a territory dispute or is a victim of a redirected attack (and therefore confused why she was attacked) she will be wary of the other cat and will often run away from him. As she runs, his desire to chase her becomes even stronger. Pretty soon the cycle of running and chasing has been established even without a precipitating event.

Separate the cats and follow the same instructions in the *article on Introducing a New Cat*. Modify the environment using the information in *Setting up the Environment for Your Cat* article. Do not punish cats any cat that is involved; this will may lead to further aggression between cats and fear or aggression towards you. See a veterinarian for a full examination on both cats and treat any injuries to prevent infection. In severe cases, talk with your veterinarian about supplementing your behavior plan with medication. NEVER medicate your cat with consulting a veterinarian. Many over the counter and prescription medications are harmful or even fatal to cats.

***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](http://www.waysidewaifs.org)***

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