

Teaching your Cat to Play Nicely

Does your kitten attack your ankles from under the bed as you walk by? Bite your hand hard enough to hurt when you play? Kittens and young cats use play to practice their survival skills, whether they're going to need them later or not, so they'll treat any moving object, including people and other animals, like prey -- chasing, pouncing, biting, and all.

Kittens learn from their mother and their littermates how to regulate their bites so that they don't hurt, so if your cat was separated from family young, they may play rougher than you like. Also, people often teach kittens to play rough by using their hands and feet instead of toys - - forgetting that kittens grow up to be cats fast, and what was acceptable in a small kitten will be painful from a grown-up cat.

Help your kitten learn to play nicely when they're young; you won't regret it.

When your cat or kitten plays too rough

As with most behavioral issues, it is easier to prevent the behavior from starting rather than trying to stop the behavior once it has begun. If your cat is already showing signs of unnecessary roughness, we want to head them off. How?

Predict & Prevent bad behaviors - heading it off entirely is the best approach:

1. As we have said before, don't get started by making hands, fingers, toes, etc into playthings. If you already do, simply stop.
2. Eliminate the cat's ability to launch a surprise attack on you or anyone else by adding a bell collar (not always helpful for a sit and wait ambush predator) and be aware of frequent ambush areas.
3. Know the warning signs and break off play or avoid contact when the cat or kitten is likely to react unfavorably.



Additional Resources

Please contact our Behavior Team to speak with a skilled behavior specialist.

BehaviorTeam@spca.org

www.spca.org/petuniversity

If you are not successful in preventing the behavior from starting then you have a few options to cease the behavior once it does start:

- Remove the stimulus. If your cat is enjoying playtime, remove the play object---yourself--- to stop the behavior. This is exactly what the mom would have done and it can be very affective. With consistency, this will teach your cat that the way to get your attention and have someone to play with is to stay within the boundaries you set for appropriate play.
- Replace the stimulus by throwing a toy and redirecting their attention. If your kitten stalks and attacks your feet as you walk down the hall, be ready to redirect them with a few toys in your pocket to toss for them to chase. When your cat wants to wrestle, redirect them from your hands with soft stuffed toys that they can grab onto.
- Something to startle the cat in a way that doesn't associate directly with you such as a blast of air from behind your back. (This should be thought of as a last resort after all other tools have been tried)
- Do not punish your cat with yelling, or physical punishment as this will only associate you with negative experiences to your cat.

Tips to retrain for the behavior you want:

Encourage your cat to chase and pounce on fishing pole-type toys or fuzzy mice on strings, for example. If you set up a few regular playtimes each day, your kitten will have an outlet for their energy, and they'll know when to expect the fun. Tire your cat out before bedtime, and they'll have an easier time leaving you alone at night. See [Cat Toys – Choosing and Using Them](#)

Make sure everyone who comes in contact with the cat is consistent about following the rules. If one or two people keep playing with their hands instead of toys or encouraging your cat to chase and attack their feet, the boundaries won't be understood.

Make sure you have plenty of toys around so that you can be ready to redirect your cat anytime—some in your pocket and some in every room, for example.

Provide your cat with daily and routine enrichment. A few ideas are listed below:

- Provide Cat trees and elevated window perches
- Post elevated and floor scratch posts
- Provide a bird and squirrel feeder near a window where the cat can watch them from inside on their perch.
- Provide puzzle feeders (purchased or homemade)
- Get the cat outside via safe multilevel outdoor enclosures or, if trained, walks on a leash.

Be aware that cat bites and scratches can be serious, so make sure to treat them carefully, seeking medical attention if necessary. By teaching your cat, from a young age, the manners you want them to have when they're older, you can avoid much larger problems later.

If your cat's aggression is causing you worry, see also "[Understanding Cat Aggression](#)"