

# Understanding Cat Aggression



Aggression is a very natural response in cats and in any animal for that matter. Cats may behave aggressively for many reasons, but it is not a behavior we want to encourage. It is important to understand and educate ourselves on the potential issues, know the signs to look for, and be proactive in preventing aggression issues from arising in the first place. When problems do arise, the first step should always be a trip to the vet's office. Any number of medical conditions or medications may lead to an increase in aggression. It is important to NOT use "traditional" punishment of any kind. Better yet, let's identify the stimulus and avoid the problem altogether.

## Additional Resources

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

[BehaviorTeam@spca.org](mailto:BehaviorTeam@spca.org)

[www.spca.org/petuniversity](http://www.spca.org/petuniversity)

## Types of Aggression in Cats

### Territorial aggression (Resource Guarding)

As a cat matures, it will become more territorial and will be vying for rank and access to resources. Cats can react in an aggressive manner when they feel another cat, human, or object is invading their personal space or is otherwise threatening something they want to protect, from a litter of kittens to a favorite toy or resting spot. This can happen when a new cat enters the household, when one cat reaches maturity, or with cats outside the family, for example.

Territorial aggression isn't exclusive to male or female cats, and it can happen between cats of any age. With multiple cats in a household the problem may only be with specific cats and not all the others. Knowing the warning signs is important to help in a territorial escalated situation. Signs can begin with stiff body, growling, tail wagging, and hissing, which can escalate to chasing and swatting, then actual fighting or attacking.

To prevent or improve overt territorial aggression it is important to know your cat's warning signs. Use distractors to redirect the aggressor's attention and focus before things escalate. Be sure the distractors cannot be associated with you. For example, do not use spray bottles or physical punishment.

## Redirected aggression

Sometimes a trigger action or object may create an aggressive reaction in a cat. But what the trigger actually was is unclear. It may be something that is physically unavailable (a cat on the other side of the window) or socially unavailable (a larger dominant animal or human). Thus the cat may redirect the aggressive response to something that is available, such as another cat, another animal/object or a human. Imagine watching a scary, horrible movie and then coming into the kitchen where your spouse is drinking coffee- and then slugging your spouse! If your partner wasn't watching the movie, they would be confused as would anyone else in the kitchen.

It is important to try and identify the trigger of the aggression and remove it. If the aggression was between family cats, using a blanket or piece of cardboard will help separate the cats. Then move them safely into different rooms. Upset cats want the same thing that upset people want; a quiet room and dim lighting, if possible. Through treats and play, the next step is to rebuild trust and positive associations in the area where the problem occurred and be proactive in spotting the triggers in the future.

## Fear Induced Aggression

When cats feel threatened, they can be provoked to attack in their own defense. Almost any frightened animal will flee if possible, cats included. But a cornered animal can be forced to act. A cat that is cornered through being in a carrier, physically restrained, or simply startled, can lash out. The important thing to understand is how the cat feels -- even if the threat from the other cat or person isn't as severe as the cat thinks, it's the cat's experience of fear that matters.

Defensive postures from a cat include crouching, tucking their tail under their body, putting their ears back, vocalizing, and rolling slightly to one side. Counter conditioning is often incorporated into desensitizing the cat to the fearful stimulus. For example, if your cat is afraid of thunderstorms, the purchasing a cd or streaming music can help a cat become more comfortable and accustomed to all the sounds.

## Play Aggression

What is play aggression? Basically it's just a cat that is too rough for our tastes. It is widely believed that animal play, particularly with young animals, give them a chance to practice adult behaviors in a safe manner. Kittens practice components of hunting and physical skills via repetition but play aggression can surface at any age. To prevent play aggression, do not encourage rough play with human body parts such as hands. For more detailed information, see "[Teaching your Cat to Play Nicely.](#)"

## Pain- Induced Aggression

Cats have bodies that can be very sensitive to the touch. Cats that are in pain may act aggressively toward people or other pets in an attempt to avoid touch, movement, or certain activities that worsen pain. Cats with osteoarthritis, for example, may not want joints touched or manipulated. They may hiss, bite, or scratch in response. Sometimes cats may act aggressively

even after the once painful body parts have healed as they remember and still want to avoid the pain they experienced before.

The best way to manage pain induced aggression is to not touch the painful parts of your cat's body and by working with a veterinarian, you can make a plan for therapeutic pain control.

### **What to do if you see unwanted behavior in your cat:**

- ◆ First, a call or visit to your veterinarian. Any sudden behavior changes in your cat may be a sign of a serious health problem; cats are very good at masking symptoms until they're very sick.
- ◆ Have all cats in your home neutered or spayed; even one intact cat can influence the behavior of all the pets in your home.
- ◆ Improve their environment by adding cat trees, perches near windows, scratching posts, puzzle feeders, no bowl feeders, additional litter boxes, and more!
- ◆ Spread out resources like water bowls, food bowls, and litter box in separate areas of the home if the problem is with multiple cats. Generally the rule is to always add 1 to the number of cats. For example, 3 cats should have 4 litter boxes.
- ◆ Use products available on the market for reducing stress in cats, which ultimately can be very effective in reducing aggressive behavior. Of particular interest is the product Feliway, which simulates feline facial pheromones and sends an "everything's all right" message to cats. It comes in a spray as well as a plug-in diffuser. You can use the spray on vertical surfaces in areas where your cat likes to hang out including doorways, corners of furniture, and corners of walls. Feliway comes in two different formulas; one for single cats and one for multi-cat households. It doesn't work with all cats, but many cat owners report excellent results. Look for suppliers on the Web, or check with your local pet store or with your vet.
- ◆ If the aggression is between two cats, separate your cats to calm them. Once you are ready, reintroduce them slowly and carefully to let them learn to spend time with each other happily and without fear or aggression. The process of reintroduction may take anywhere from a few days to a few weeks, but if you go slowly and let the cats set the pace, you'll have the best results. See "[Introducing Cats.](#)"
- ◆ If your cat aggression problem is severe, contact a veterinary behaviorist for advice on using medication along with your behavior modification. Only a veterinarian can prescribe the appropriate medication for your cat; don't use any medications without the guidance of your veterinarian.

### **What not to do:**

- ◆ Don't allow the cats to continue to fight or intimidate one another. Cats generally won't work things out for themselves; once a problem starts, it will get worse if the cats continue to behave aggressively. The stress can cause other behavior issues as well, such as litter box problems. If you need to stop a fight between cats, you can use a loud noise, or toss something soft between

them. If you need to, you can toss a towel over one cat to separate it from the other; don't reach in with your hands or you may be hurt yourself.

- ◆ Don't punish the cat -- punishment will make cats more fearful and is likely to escalate problems or make you the target of defensive aggression.