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## CAT PLAYFUL AGGRESSION

### ***What Is Feline Play Aggression?***

Feline play aggression can be a very annoying and unsettling problem for any cat owner. Play aggression can be loosely defined as aggressive interactions, between the problem cat and another cat or between the cat and one or more people. The cat shows the aggression by giving signs (body postures) of fighting, exploring, predatory behavior or investigating toward the victim involved.

Play aggression is most common in cats two years old or younger, although it has been noted in some older cats. The aggression is usually initiated by the movement of the victim and is perhaps time of day and location specific (examples: when owner returns from work or wakes in the morning). The victim may be only one specific person or may be any person that passes through a selected area. This aggression may involve stalking, ambushing, or closely following a person and then quickly, silently rushing at the person and attacking them. The feet and legs tend to be the common target areas of cats engaging in play aggression. During the attack the cat may wrap itself around the victims limb, swat, claw, bite and kick. The cat may frequently run away from the victim after the attack is over.

### ***Why Does Play Aggression Develop?***

Play aggression may tend to develop when a kitten has no other young cats to interact with. This can occur if the kitten is weaned from its mother and litter mates too early and is placed in an environment with no other cats or the only cats the kitten has contact with are too old or unwilling to play. Social interaction between kittens is important and allows them to engage in play which includes behaviors used in fighting, stalking and killing prey, exploring and investigation techniques. Playing kittens may seem like they are being aggressive to one another, but they are continually giving each other signals to indicate that the interaction is meant as play and not as aggression. If one kitten gets carried away at play (bites or scratches too hard), the other kittens will usually correct the offender. The correction may be in the form of a growl, a serious bite or the play will simply stop.

A kitten's mother also plays a role in socializing the kitten to interact properly with other cats and even with people. If a kitten bites the mother too hard while it is nursing the mother will correct the kitten with a swat or a low growl. This will teach the kitten to inhibit its bite so that it learns how to bite others without actually hurting them. The socializing that occurs between kitten and siblings, and kitten and mother allows the kitten to learn how aggressive the kitten can be before it hurts its playmate. If a kitten successfully learns social behavior, the kitten is less likely to hurt a playmate.

Unsuccessful socializing is not the only component leading to play aggression. It can also be caused by an active cat being confined and not allowed to release its energy often enough. This is evident when play aggression occurs after periods when the cat has had little interaction with the owner (after owner returns from work or when the owner wakes in the morning) and the cat has had little opportunity to play.

### ***Can Anything Be Done About Play Aggression?***

Play aggression can be treated. Treatments could involve a companion for the cat or center around behavioral modifications that tend to redirect the aggression, interrupt the aggression, reward appropriate behavior (calm) or wear the cat out so it has no need to express the behavioral problem.

### ***How Can Play Aggression Be Treated?***

It is important that the owner understand that, no matter what mode of treatment they choose to use on their cat, they must be consistent and always react the same way to the cat's behavior.

If redirection of the cat's aggression is chosen, it must be implemented before the cat is actually engaged in aggressive action. For example, as soon as the owner notices signs that the cat is going to be aggressive, the owner must create an alternate victim for the cat. This can be done by throwing a toy out to catch the cat's attention so the toy will be used instead of the owner as the target for the aggression. Long pieces of thick craft yarn, strategically placed around the home which can then be quickly grabbed, are good objects to redirect the playful aggression. If children are in the home,

purchasing a small child's fishing rod, tying a cat toy to the end of the fishing line, and having the child cast and retrieve the toy down a hallway, allowing the cat to chase the toy, is a good activity to keep both parties busy.

If the owner decides to interrupt the aggressive behavior and attempt to stop it, the owner must also be able to recognize when the cat is intending to become aggressive. The owner should implement some means of startling the cat before the aggressive behavior actually commences. The owner must use a humane method of punishing the cat. Noise making devices (fog horn), water pistols or compressed air may be used on the cat. It is important that the mode of punishment not be directly associated or physically related to the owner or the cat may experience fear aggression toward the owner.

Rewarding proper behavior and ignoring or avoiding inappropriate behavior are also possible treatments for playful aggression. The owner should control when the cat can have contact with the owner by only giving the cat attention (treats, petting, interactive playing) when the cat is behaving appropriately. When the cat is about to become aggressive, the owner should minimize any contact with the animal, so that the owner cannot be the victim of the cat's aggression. Again the owner must always react the same way to the cat's behavior, and must never tolerate or encourage aggressive behavior.

A companion for the problem cat may discourage the aggressive behavior. A companion may decrease the cat's boredom in the hours of the day that the owner is not spending time with the cat. If the companion is a good playmate, two cats will play together and wear each other out so that the problem cat will only seek affection from the owner instead of attacking the owner, because the cat is more tired.

### ***It Takes Time***

A problem cat that displays play aggression can become a nice cat if the owner is willing to spend the time to help the cat correct the aggressive behavior of the cat.