

Avoiding Injury: Tips for Interpreting Signs of Aggression in Cats

- Most cats exhibit outward signs when they are unhappy or angry about something. Understanding those behaviors may save you from injury.
- Show children how to play gently with cats, and discourage them from chasing or restraining a cat.
- Never approach a strange cat. If you must interact with one, let it approach you.

Despite centuries of sharing our lives and homes with cats, many pet owners know very little about interpreting signs of anger, fear, or aggression in these creatures. The typical “Halloween cat” posture (arched back, raised fur, ears back, hissing) clearly indicates fear and/or aggression, but cats also use other postures and behaviors that are more subtle and easily missed. It may be impossible to avoid ever creating a hostile situation with a cat, but a few tips can help you (hopefully) avoid injury if you find yourself in such a situation.

What Are the Signs of Aggression in Cats?

Fortunately, most cats exhibit some sort of outward sign when they are unhappy or angry about something. Unfortunately, some of these signs can be very subtle and difficult to interpret:

- Avoiding eye contact, or staring directly at you
- Dilated pupils
- Head held down
- Sharply swishing the tail back and forth
- Raised fur along the neck, back, and tail
- Puffing up the tail
- Ears flattened against head or held back
- Hissing, growling

In some cases, the signs of trouble may occur very suddenly and without apparent warning. For example, *petting-evoked aggression* occurs when a person is

petting a cat (usually while the cat is on their lap) and the cat seems to be enjoying the interaction, but then suddenly strikes out at or bites the person. The most logical explanation for this behavior is that some cats have a limited tolerance for being petted, so the best way to avoid this problem is to stop petting before that limit is reached. Unfortunately, the signs preceding the strike or bite may be very subtle—flicking the tail or ear may be the only indication of a problem. Understanding those behaviors for what they are may save the person from being injured.

What to Do

- **When in doubt, create distance.** If the cat is trying to get away from you, let it—as long as you can do this safely. If you are pursuing or restraining the cat in any way, stop. If a cat is

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fearful or aggressive, its natural response is usually to get away from you. As long as it can do that, the situation may not progress any further. Always leave a cat a way to escape a situation. Generally, if the cat can get away, it is less likely to attack or become more aggressive.

- **Keep your movements slow and your voice soft.** The cat is faster than you. Sudden movements or loud noises (like shouting) will startle a cat that is already afraid or annoy a cat that is already irritated.
- **Consult your veterinarian.** Painful conditions, hormonal influences, or other medical issues may cause your cat to be aggressive. Relieving

Behavior and Training

these problems may help eliminate the behavior.

- ***If you have time, try to learn what the cat likes or doesn't like.*** Some cats like to be picked up and held, but others absolutely refuse to accept this. This can seem contradictory when the same cat that doesn't want to be picked up wants to be in your lap if you are sitting down. Often, interacting with cats involves negotiation—if picking up the cat is not going to work, don't do it.
- ***Educate children.*** Without meaning to, children can be rough with cats or display other behaviors that may cause a cat to become fearful or aggressive toward them. Some children need to be shown how to play gently with a cat. Very young children may also pursue or restrain a cat that is trying to get away from them or pick up a cat that resents being picked up. These activities should be discouraged.
- ***Introduce new pets slowly and under controlled situations.*** If your cat is meeting another animal (whether a dog or another cat), try to have at least one of them on a leash. If a fight breaks out, the combatants can be pulled apart without having to reach into the fight to separate them. Also, don't be surprised if it

takes your cat a long time to accept a new pet. As long as the two pets can get away from one another and don't have to compete for food or affection, fights can generally be avoided.

What Not to Do

- ***Never pursue a cat that is trying to get away from you.***
- ***Don't approach strange cats.*** If you must interact with them, let them approach you. If the cat is injured or in pain, it may be more likely to be aggressive, so if you have to pick the cat up to help it, use a towel or other means to protect yourself.
- ***Don't underestimate a cat's ability to hurt you.*** Yes, cats are small, but don't think that their small size means they are not dangerous. Even a kitten can seriously injure you. Cats are blessed with incredible speed and flexibility. Unless they are declawed, all four feet are weapons, as is a mouth full of sharp teeth. Cat scratches and bites can transmit bacteria that lead to cat scratch fever, a disease with flu-like symptoms. Cat bites can also result in infection and severe tissue swelling. Always use caution when dealing with a cat you don't know, even if the cat belongs to a friend or relative.