

Feline Play Aggression: How to help your cat play appropriately

The drive to play is extremely strong in cats. Why? Because **play is a form of an important instinctual cat behavior—hunting!** And just as with hunting, it involves stalking, pouncing on, clawing and biting whatever the cat is treating as “prey.” Play is incredibly important for cats as an energy outlet, and most cats who exhibit play aggression are simply looking to fulfill that need—we just need to help show them how!

Cats who exhibit play aggression lack the skills that most cats use to tell them **what is appropriate** to bite/pounce on/grab and **how hard is too hard** while playing. Play aggression often presents as a cat biting, grabbing onto, stalking or “attacking” humans as they would a fellow feline playmate—and without the inhibition that would make the play appropriate. Often it presents in kittens and adolescent cats, though cats can show play aggression at any age. So what can we do about it? Below are some Do’s and Don’ts that can help you teach your cat how to play appropriately.

DO:

- **#1 rule: Play with your cat!** They are looking for an outlet for their energy, and if you don’t provide an appropriate one, they will choose an inappropriate one!
- **Schedule at least two 10-15-minute play sessions every day.** Time yourself if you need to, or schedule playtime during commercial breaks while watching TV. Make a *routine* so that the cat begins to expect exercise to happen at specific times of day. This will help YOU begin to anticipate when they will be most active, and help THEM burn off the energy that makes them want to go looking for trouble.
- **Use interactive play during play sessions.** The type of play matters! While cats love to bat around toys on their own, they get *much* more out of toys that put YOU in the driver’s seat such as wand or fishing pole style toys.
- **Make the toy act like prey!** No bird or mouse just hangs out in front of a cat’s face—they race along over couches, under tables, on top of bookshelves, etc. Often the most fun is when they’re *about to get away!*
- **Try offering more vertical space,** like cat trees, bookshelves, tables, and use them while playing. Being able to sit on, jump on and climb on multiple levels is not only enriching, but will help tire them out!
- **OBSERVE YOUR CAT’S BODY LANGUAGE!** If your cat tends to pounce on you, chances are you know “the look” they get before it happens. Large pupils, lowered body carriage, crouched posture, wiggling butt... you know your cat best. Learn to see it coming and **have a toy ready to redirect their attention!** We want them to think, “*why would I pounce on their ankle when I could have my amazing feather toy instead?*”
 - NOTE: It is very important to try and PREEMPT the pounce—we don’t want to engage them with toys right AFTER they have pounced. We don’t want them to learn that is a way to make play happen.
 - If you DO miss the signals, disengage as calmly as possible and step out of reach, ex. behind a door. Give them a short break, THEN reengage with a toy. Consider putting a bell on their collar to help you notice their approach!
- **Practice GAME OVER: all play stops if claws or teeth land on you.** If your cat makes a mistake, calmly remove all interaction from your cat for a short period of time--simply becoming still, or moving behind a door if necessary. The idea is that if your cat plays inappropriately, the fun stops. When they display appropriate behavior, the fun begins again!
- **Utilize food puzzle toys, with treats and/or meals.** The high drive of play aggressive cats often lends itself well to foraging and interactive feeders. These don’t have to break the bank—try www.foodpuzzlesforcats.com! This is also a wonderful way to distract your kitty if you need some space, like while working or cooking dinner.
- **Expect “high energy times” to be in the morning and evening.** This is when your cat’s biological clock will be telling them it’s time to hunt!
- **If possible, trim your cat’s nails!** This can help to prevent painful scratches while your cat is still learning the ropes.

DON'T:

- **Leave out interactive toys while not in use.** Instead, store them out of reach until playtime. This keeps them interesting and exciting! You may even stash some in high traffic places so you are ready if your cat decides to...ahem... start an impromptu play session. Make sure your cat has access to some fun self-play toys in the meantime! Try to rotate these as well to keep them interesting.
- **Always use the same toys.** Novelty is a huge deal for cats. There are various wand toys on the market such as the Cat Catcher Teaser Wand that can attach/detach multiple “ends,” allowing you to turn almost anything into an interactive toy. You’ll get a feel for what types of toys your cat likes—noisy toys, plush toys, paper, string toys, etc.
- **Pet them during playtimes, or any time they are in “play mode.”** Many play aggressive cats won’t differentiate (yet!) between hands near them and toys near them. Reserve petting contact for when they are calm and relaxed.
- **Offer your cat catnip, or toys that have catnip in them.** While not harmful, catnip can induce a heightened state of excitement which would make a cat far more likely to exhibit the more challenging aspects of play aggression.
- **Play using hands or limbs as toys. Ever.** We want the cat to learn that the only fun play comes when chasing *appropriate* items.
- **React to a pounce with a yell, or by jerking away quickly.** This is how prey responds and can trigger an escalation of the behavior. Instead, disengage as calmly and dispassionately as possible. Be boring!
- **Punish the cat physically or verbally.** This is the one reaction that is GUARENTEED to escalate the behavior. The cat will respond with escalated aggression out of fear, defensiveness, or perceived escalation of “play.”
- **Put the cat in a “time out,” i.e. carry them to a room for confinement,** especially if the cat is likely to bite when picked up and handled.
- **React emotionally to altercations.** This can be difficult. Having your cat “attack” you can feel personal, and sometimes painful! But try to keep in mind that these behaviors are simply trying to fill an instinctual need, which these cats don’t have the skills they need to express appropriately yet. That’s where you can help!

Examples of interactive toys:



Cat Catcher Teaser Wand



Cat Dancer



Feather fishing pole toy



Feather wand toy

Body language signals that may precede play aggression:

Hiding/stalking behavior

Tail flicking/twitching/lashing

Ears held back

Dilated pupils

Back muscles twitching or rippling

Piloerection (puffy hair) at base of tail

Hard stare

Slow deliberate walking approach with chest high

Engaging with scratching post or furniture

Sensitivity/head whipping for touch

Engaging then becoming bored with self-play

Running “zoomies” through the house