



Feline Thunderdome: Understanding and Managing Rough Play in Cats

Whether it's two cats getting to know each other for the first time, a couple of rowdy kittens getting noisy, or adult cats who sometimes take their play a little too far, being a caretaker for rowdy feline players can be stressful! How do you know if or when you should separate them? How can you prevent unwanted stress, both for the cats and for you? We've put together a guide to help you better understand feline play, and address some of the common challenges associated with it.

FIGHT vs PLAY

True cat fights look VERY different than rowdy, rough and tumble feline play. They are *loud*, intense, fur is flying, and often too fast to even see what's going on. In most cases one cat is the aggressor while the other cat is attempting to flee. Rough play on the other hand happens in (comparatively!) "slow motion," with both cats taking occasional breaks. You might see them "playing patty cake" with their front paws before tackling one another, gnawing (biting with inhibition), rabbit kicking, then separating to tackle again.

With rough and rowdy play, we always ask these questions:

1. **Is it mutual?** Are both cats getting a chance to be the "pouncer," or is one constantly being cornered? If the latter, it's probably time for a break.
2. **Are they taking breaks, even short ones?** Can they disengage, even briefly (such as to chase a toy), or are they hyper focused and escalating excitement?
3. **Does the interaction look different "on mute?"** Many cats will vocalize during play or first introductions, and many will vocalize when they are not in fact being hurt. Vocalizations can be scary to watch, but (especially for teens and kittens!) it's important to distinguish between vocal players and cats who are actually being bitten or scratched. Hissing and yowling can be important communication tools between cats, and often mean "stop I'm uncomfortable!" rather than "stop I'm in pain!" *Usually the deciding factor on whether or not to "call it" after a vocalization is question number 1.*

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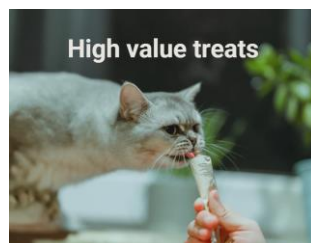
If being introduced for the FIRST TIME

Take your time, and see our [Cat-to-Cat Introduction Handout!](#) With feline introductions, TIME IS YOUR ALLY. Cats take a while to get used to new environments as well as one another. The stress of a transition can “stack” on top of the stress of an introduction, which can lead to tense interactions.

Boring is BETTER. If your cats are playful, try first helping them practice lots of “non play” time on either side of a barrier like an x-pen or baby gate *before* letting them out together. Good options are when both are eating a meal on opposite sides of a gate (feed *slightly* separately to discourage resource guarding). See if they can settle down within sight of one another. Heated beds or warm laundry can encourage kitties to settle down for a nap, especially after a meal! We want them to practice their excitement level being low when they’re around each other.

Practice recall. If they are continuously focused on one another, try distracting their attention away from the other cat with things like their favorite food or an extra special active toy. You may have to audition some to find their favorites—see our Enrichment and Happy Hunters Handouts for tips!

Tools that can assist your introduction process:



When you're ready for playtime

Keep the sessions very short at first. This might mean that they only spend 2 or 3 minutes at a time together for the first week or so! The reason for this is that novelty = excitement/potential anxiety. The longer they're together, the greater chance they'll be able to ramp up. Having multiple daily short sessions means that the play doesn't have the chance to tip into conflict in the first place.

Just as with the barrier, it's as important for them to practice NOT playing with each other as it is to practice mutual play. That way, seeing the other cat doesn't automatically equal smackdown time.

Stay involved, but don't hover. When you see they are getting interested in play, jump in with some long toys. See if you can get them both chasing the same toy, then different toys. See if you can lead one away from the other. We want them practicing being focused on *other things* when it's “go-time.” If they are food motivated, try breaking up play sessions by grabbing their favorite treats and offering them some. Distractions from play should mean GOOD things are about to happen. However we don't

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want to follow the play around while looming over the two cats—we want the toy you have to be exciting enough that they will come to YOU.

QUIT WHILE THEY'RE AHEAD. While play is going well, THAT'S the time to offer an alternative like a treat or a toy, move them into their separate spaces, and give them some enrichment items so they can finish playing by themselves. It might be a quick break or a long one, but use the toys to move them apart, close the door, and give them both something AMAZING like baby food, small bits of sardines, etc. AGAIN: It's ok if it's only a 2 min play session! That's 2 minutes in the bank of positive play experiences. And they really add up!

HOW to enforce a break

So you identify that your cats need a break. HOW we separate the cats can be as important as WHEN. The main reason we want to avoid aversives (spray bottles, air horns, grabbing, physical intervention) when you need to separate cats (other than because it can cause redirected aggression) is because *we don't want to create a negative association with the mutual play itself.*

If every time they play together it ends up with aversives (punishment) entering the picture, it tends to create anxiety around the act of mutual play, which amps it up even further. The way around this is to (during this transition while they're still learning) be actively involved—i.e., practice recall, have barrier play sessions involve you with active toys, and keeping the sessions short enough to where you can easily redirect their attention with those other toys or treats. *Help them practice separating from one another BEFORE YOU NEED THEM TO, and help them learn that disengaging from play means that GOOD things happen!*

For an example of low excitement rowdy mutual cat play, check out these videos:

[Rowdy Mutual Cat Play 1](#)

[Rowdy Mutual Cat Play 2](#)

In the videos you will see the cats taking breaks, moving in “slow motion” through rough play behaviors, and both cats choosing to re-engage with play. Despite showing behaviors such as grabbing, biting, tackling, chasing, and rabbit kicking, this play is very appropriate and enriching for both cats!

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