

B-20 PROTOCOL FOR CATS WITH PLAY AGGRESSION

Cats experience early kittenhood stages of both social play (3 to 12 weeks of age) and social fighting (14+ weeks of age). Much of kitten play is associated with skills useful for later hunting behavior. In fact, play becomes particularly well developed at about 6 to 8 weeks of age when cats develop good eye-paw coordination and are able to sense and respond to olfactory threats. Cats are superb solitary hunters and can begin to show independent predatory behavior by 5 weeks of age. Their mothers begin to teach predatory behavior as early as 3 weeks of age, and in large cat groups family members will continue to guide hunting skills for months. Studies have shown that cats that are weaned early (orphaned kittens that are hand-raised by humans or those born to mothers that are ill or do not have enough milk) exhibit very early predatory behavior and that predatory behavior replaces some play behaviors.

These normal cat behaviors are seen in an intensified form with play aggression. Play aggression is usually directed toward people but certainly can be directed toward other, generally older, animals in the household.

Play aggression is usually associated with early weaning and a shift to more predatory behaviors or with rough play from clients. In the former case the kitten plays roughly because its brothers and sisters or mother does not correct it when it hurts them. There is also probably some component of the actual way cats play with each other, when compared with the way they play with people, that is important but unexplored. In the latter case the kittens are taught to play aggressively by the people.

Treatment of play aggression focuses on three major strategies:

1. Avoiding the circumstances that encourage the cat to play in this manner
2. Being attentive to the behaviors that are associated with the play aggression and interrupting (correcting those)
3. Giving the cat a more appropriate outlet for its play and energy

Cat bites and scratches cause disease. They can be seriously dangerous to someone who is already ill, is immunocompromised, or has poor circulation. You are not being mean by controlling your cat's aggression. If anything, your relationship with your cat will improve.

Checklist

1. Learn to recognize the early signs of play aggression in your cat. Play aggressive cats will hide behind doors or around banisters, crouching and waiting for any movement. They then will spring, using both teeth and claws, before quickly fleeing. Expect the cats to hide in these locations and beware; correct the cat at the first sign of any of these behaviors. Some cats will startle at the sound of a loud noise like a clap; some need a stronger stimulus such as a water pistol, foghorn, or compressed air canister. Cats that like to play in water may not respond to water. The point is not to bathe or mist the cat; the point is to *startle* the cat so that it aborts the aggressive attack. Startle, which is a form of punishment, works best if it interrupts the cat in the act of committing the inappropriate behavior. The earlier in the sequence of events that this happens, the better.
2. Do not physically punish the cat. This only teaches the cat that you will play back roughly, and the cat will respond with intensified violence. Furthermore, if the cat is small or a young kitten, you could seriously injure the cat. People observe that mothers carry kittens around by the neck with their teeth and reason that kittens will not be hurt by pinches and so on. This is not true; cats have extremely sensitive pressure receptors around their face and at the base of their teeth and can correct kittens in ways humans cannot. Furthermore, cats are often communicating other information to the kitten at that time that we are not capable of evaluating.
3. Put a bell on the cat's collar (use a breakaway collar). This is particularly important for cats that play with your moving body parts or clothing or those that are adept at hiding and waiting for you to pass by. Many of these cats hide under furniture and then attack toes when you sit down and move your feet. The bell will let you know exactly where the cat is and will allow you to do steps 1 and 2 above.
4. *Do not* play roughly with your hands. Do not wrestle with the cat, grab the cat by the head and shake it, move your hands back and forth so that the cat chases them, or pull the cat's tail. Whenever you are playing with the cat you must use a toy. If you do not use a toy, the cat will not learn to distinguish your body parts from items of play. If the cat misses the toy and grabs or scratches your hand or arm, stop the play and act mortally wounded. If you cannot make a sound that will startle the cat or if this is not your style, you can quickly blow in the cat's face. The point is to startle the cat so that it stops the aggressive event and learns from that experience. If it is done correctly, this action will decrease the probability of the cat exhibiting the inappropriate behavior in the future. There are many stuffed kitty toys on the market or you can make some from stuffed socks. Make sure that the toys you choose for your cat do not have loose threads or parts that can be chewed off; these can easily become lodged in the cat's intestines. Check your cat's toys for wear frequently and replace them if they are damaged or if you are in doubt.
5. Increase the amount of your cat's aerobic exercise. You can throw rolled-up tin foil or paper for the cat to bat around the room. You can rig a scratching post so that the cat gets a treat if it scratches energetically at the top of the post. If your cat likes catnip, you can use a toy system with catnip "mice" and springs that are attached to kitty condos. You can attach a toy to an extendible, flexible, elastic roping that you tie to your waist; that way, wherever you walk the cat will be able to chase a moving toy.
6. If all else fails or if you are not averse to it and your cat is young or is a kitten, consider getting another cat. You should try to select one that is also outgoing; you do not want a very young kitten that could be injured by your cat's rough play. Another cat often provides the perfect foil for your cats' aggressive play. Cats are more social than is commonly appreciated. It is not much more difficult to care for a second cat, and the company will provide your cat with an additional outlet for play. Furthermore, if the second cat plays appropriately, it will be able to correct your ag-

- gressive cat in a way that makes sense within a feline social system.
- 7. Make sure that your cat has its claws trimmed and kept short. If your cat uses a scratching post covered with sandpaper, this is very easy. Regardless, provide your cat with something besides you to scratch. Logs, scratching posts, and tree branches can be useful.
 - 8. If your cat persists in its aggressive play, banish it to another room. When the cat is calm, let the cat out and repeat the above instructions. Most play is about attention—eventually this will work.
 - 9. If anyone is injured by the cat, seek immediate competent medical help.