

## PLAY AGGRESSION IN KITTENS

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### FELINE SOCIAL BEHAVIOR

Kittens are naturally inquisitive and their future ability to relate to other cats, animals and novel situations is often a function of their early experiences. Ideally a kitten should have the opportunity to have an abundance of positive experiences relating to cats, people, other species, places and things within the first 1 to 3 months of life. Pleasant, interactive normal play with another kitten during this developmental period also provides fundamental social skills necessary for a lifetime of successful encounters with other cats. Socialization is not about play; socialization is learning to tolerate members or one's own species as well as members or other species. <sup>1</sup>

Table 1: Socialization period of Cats<sup>2</sup>

<u>Age</u>	<u>development</u>
4 weeks	Social play begins
5 weeks	Predatory behavior starts
6 weeks	Object and locomotory play starts
6 to 7 weeks	Adult like locomotion
9 to 14 weeks	Social play peaks
16 weeks	Object and locomotory play peaks/territoriality may begin

### DIAGNOSIS OF PLAY AGGRESSION

Studies show that aggression is the second most common reason cats are seen by veterinary behavior specialists.<sup>3</sup> Human directed aggression by cats is commonly characterized by the following categories of aggression: play, fear, petting intolerance, redirected, pain and maternal.<sup>4</sup> As with all behavior problems a complete history, physical examination and medical testing are essential foundation. Pertinent history includes descriptions of early experiences, household environment, relationships with family members and other pets, daily activities and an understanding of the cat's personality and habits. Cats ultimately diagnosed as play aggression are often under two years of age and the clinical signs of play related aggression were present as kittens. Some authors describe this syndrome as "Misdirected predatory aggression".<sup>5</sup> Generally this condition is progressive; worsening to the point that veterinary assistance is sought. Typically attacks are directed at moving stimuli (human or animal) and the cats may have a preferred target. The cat approaches his intended victim; crouches silently in wait,

stalks and chases with tail twitching, forward facing ears and a focused stare.<sup>6</sup> The kittens or cats may be seen pouncing, leaping sideways, wrestling, swatting and biting.<sup>7</sup> The diagnosis of “play aggression” sounds benign but “play” refers to the underlying motivation for the cat and family members may sustain serious injuries especially if the situation is untreated, progresses or is mismanaged with inappropriate physical punishment. Families concerns need to be addressed seriously. The health and welfare of all family members needs to be considered especially those of children, elderly and those with medical conditions resulting in fragile skin or impaired immune systems.<sup>8</sup>

Table 2: Factors favoring development of play aggression<sup>9</sup>

<u>FACTOR</u>	<u>EXPLANATION</u>
Age of cat	The problem is more common in kittens
Play experience as kitten	Kitten was encouraged to chase/attack human hands or feet
Number of cats in home	The cat lives alone or without a playful feline companion
Type of play with owners	Play involves rough play and teasing using fingers and toes
Amount of time left alone	Cat is alone much of the day and has little time with people

## BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION AND ENVIRONMENTAL ENRICHMENT

The key to preventing behavior problems is to identify and provide appropriate outlets for all of the needs of the kitten. All of the kitten’s needs for play, predation, exploration, scratching, elimination and social needs will need to be provided for in accordance with the individual kittens personality, play drive and energy. Interactive play with family members, mechanical toys or visual stimuli are substitutes for natural hunting, exploration and predatory experiences. Addition of another cat with similar personality, play drive and energy may result in the appropriate play and diminish the attacks on people. This option is not always successful or practical. Another cat in the home who does not entertain the kitten’s antics may result in aggression, stress, or house soiling. Placing a belled collar on the kitten may act as an early warning system for intended victims. Removal or exposure of hiding places the kitten uses as stalking centers may alleviate some surprise attacks. A combination approach of fulfilling social, predatory and play based needs and making attacks on people less successful and entertaining is required to modify the kitten’s aggressive attacks.

## PUNISHMENT

Kitten attacks are best interrupted just as the attack begins with an auditory startle. Recommend the **minimum sufficient stimulus** to effectively interrupt the attack. Aversive auditory stimuli (horns, whistles, cans of compressed air, party noise makers, etc) are more effective and less likely to produce fear of people than physical corrections.<sup>10</sup> Avoid all physical punishment; no hitting, swatting, thumping on the nose or restraining. The kitten will either view these interactions as play and an indication that rough, rowdy play is reciprocal or if the punishment is escalated sufficiently to stop the kitten then fear, anxiety or defensive aggression may develop. Some cats may learn from a “time out” which is the immediate removal of human social interaction. In order to be effective this must occur promptly and within seconds of the behavioral infraction. Generally this is best done by the person removing themselves from the interaction rather

than sending or taking the cat to a time out location. By the time a person catches and isolates the cat the original misdeed has been forgotten and is no longer associated with the social deprivation punishment.

Table 3: Therapy program for play aggression<sup>11</sup>

Safety	Prevent injury to vulnerable people (elderly and children)
Management	Avoid triggers and situations likely to result in attacks Trim nails Place a belled collar on the cat so his location is readily known
Environmental enrichment	Provide appropriate toys and outlets for chasing, stalking and exploring
Play times	Owners should initiate daily play sessions, multiple times a day
Punishment	Use the lowest level auditory stimulus to interrupt , then immediately redirect to a desirable response Time out (by removal of social interaction)
Another cat	Addition of a second cat with similar personality, play drive and energy may result in the appropriate play and diminish the attacks on people. This option is not always successful or practical

## PROGNOSIS

Often there is a quick resolution once the family understands the cats needs and motivation. Relapses may occur if the family reverts to punishment, rough play or becomes too busy to interact with the cat sufficiently to fill his needs. Most cats require less interactive play and stimulation as they mature so the problem tends to improve with maturity.

## REFERENCES

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- <sup>4</sup> “Human Directed Aggression in the Cat” Curtis, T Vet Clin Small Animal 38 (2008) 1131-1143
- <sup>5</sup> Horwitz, D, Mills, D and Heath, S BSAVA Manual of Canine and Feline Behavioural Medicine 220-221
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- <sup>7</sup> Landsberg GL, Hunthausen WL, Ackerman L. Handbook of Canine and Feline Behavior Problems, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Saunders, Oxford, England, 2004 429-431
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