VOKRA

VANCOUVER ORPHAN KITTEN RESCUE ASSOCIATION

Play Aggression

Play aggression can occur at any age. It is most commonly observed in cats and kittens that were not raised with littermates, or that lack opportunities to play. Learning appropriate play is an important part of a cat's socialization, and this normally occurs during time spent with littermates. Cats learn that they are biting or scratching too hard when their littermates stop playing or retaliate. Cats raised alone during their early lives may not learn this important lesson.

Play aggression can include the cat biting, chewing, scratching, or stalking and attacking people just like a cat would treat its prey. Hands, arms, feet, and legs are common targets. These cats tend to be high energy, easily bored, and may have a short attention span. Lack of scheduled, appropriate playtime is a major contributor to play aggression.

Play aggressive cats typically need a lot of space to explore and play. Large apartments or houses are best. However, if your space is smaller, you can enhance vertical space by having multiple perches and cat trees.

Play aggression is a cat behaviour issue that can be improved if fosters/adopters understand the behaviour and are willing to consistently use suggested techniques and spend the time working with the cat. It is also essential that everyone in the home is on board with the treatment plan.

DO

Teach appropriate play. Always use toys for play, preferably interactive toys with some distance between you and the cat (e.g. a fishing pole type toy with fabric or feathers at the end of it, cat dancers) that mimic hunting prey.

Provide interactive play at least twice a day, preferably in the morning and evening time. Play aggression typically peaks in the morning and evening, just like hunting would. Stick to a regular routine.

Use a noise deterrent within a few seconds of aggressive behaviour, such as a ‘tsssst’ sound. This may be helpful in startling the cat and redirecting his attention. The goal is not to scare the cat, but to distract him and refocus his attention.

If the cat bats or nips (doesn’t break the skin) to communicate unhappiness, stop what you are doing, let them settle down and then give praise and a treat.

Nipping and batting - without breaking the skin - should be considered acceptable means of communication when the cat is unhappy about something and should be listened to.

If the cat intentionally or unintentionally bites or scratches you while playing with a toy, stop the play immediately. Walk away and ignore the cat for a while or redirect with a toy. The toy should either be thrown or on a long pole, so that it is not associated with human hands. It is important not to pull your hand away, as this mimics how prey would react, and is therefore inadvertently rewarding the behaviour. If play is stopped, this teaches them that inappropriately aggressive play results in no play at all. Resume playing once the cat has calmed down.

Signs of aggressive behaviour include advancing, swishing of the tail, hair standing up on the back, stiff body posture, ears flat against the head, and dilated pupils. If they escalate further, they may vocalize by hissing or growling. In this case you should remove yourself from the room to give the cat time to calm down.

If you anticipate an attack based on the cat's body language (dilated pupils, swishing tail, hiding, or crouching), throw a toy just before the cat is about to attack or pounce. This redirects the attack towards the toy and away from you.

Consider a breakaway collar with a bell if the cat has a history of sneak attacks, so you have some warning and can distract it as described above.

Consider adopting a second cat of similar age, energy level, and temperament.

Consider ‘clicker training’ to provide the cat with more mental stimulation.

DO NOT

Use your hands or feet as toys. Never play roughly with the cat or move your hands or feet in a way that encourages the cat to chase them. Cats need to understand that hands and feet are not toys to be played with.

React by quickly jerking away, this is how prey responds to a cat. This could provoke the cat further or inadvertently reward the behaviour.

React with anger or in a big manner by screaming or jumping. This could increase the cat's stress and aggression, causing the attack to escalate.

Physically punish the cat. This will teach the cat that you will play back roughly and increase the chance the cat will respond with intensified violence. It may also cause the cat to become fearful of you.

Touch the cat. For example, do not try to pick the cat up and put him in a room for a 'time out'- the cat may try to bite you.

Scold or yell at the cat. This is difficult when attacks happen, but it's important to stay calm. Use treats or a pillow or other barrier to herd the cat into a separate room for a while so they can de compress.

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