



Human-Directed Aggression In Cats

Information adapted from the original article by Best Friends Animal Society

Is your cat biting or scratching you, stalking and pouncing on you? Is he biting you after you have been petting him for a short period of time or after you touch him in a certain place? Don't despair: There are ways to deal with aggressive behavior in cats.

Below are some general recommendations for dealing with feline aggression problems. Before treating your cat's aggressive behavior at home, make an appointment with your veterinarian. Occasionally, medical problems that can cause pain or irritability will lead to aggression; treating these conditions may resolve the behavior.

Some displays of seemingly aggressive behavior are actually normal ways for cats to communicate. Cats use behaviors such as biting, scratching and pouncing to tell other cats that they do not wish to interact, to protect their territory or valuable possessions (including food), and in play. Cats may hurt people or other animals simply because they don't know how to play appropriately. Your cat may need to be taught more desirable ways to interact or you may need to help him become more comfortable in certain situations so he doesn't feel the need to communicate in an undesirable manner.

Causes of cat aggression

Because we are not privy to cats' thoughts and feelings, it's not always possible to know what's causing aggressive behavior. In addition, aggression is a complicated subject that behavior experts are still learning about. With that said, there are several known causes behind aggressive behavior in cats, including these:

- Fear
- Play and excitement
- Redirection
- Dislike of petting
- Pain and sensitivity

Fear. Sometimes the best offense is a good defense! This is true of our fearful cats. When a cat feels threatened, he may act in ways to defend himself. This is the most common type of aggressive behavior, so keep in mind that the goal when you're developing a behavior modification plan is to make your cat feel comfortable, not threaten him further.

Play and excitement. Some cats have a hard time distinguishing between appropriate and inappropriate play. Forms of play that may be appropriate with their litter mates may make us bleed. These cats often have difficulty controlling themselves and may not have learned the self-control necessary to regulate their play before it causes injury.

Redirection. Have you ever been so upset with someone at work that you go home and yell at a family member? That's called redirection: You can't take out your frustration on who or what is upsetting you so you pick on someone else. Cats sometimes do this, too.

Dislike of petting. Some cats show a high sensitivity to being petted in certain places, and their annoyance can flair up in an instant. For example, some cats behave aggressively when touched on the rear end or when being petted while sitting on someone's lap. The reasons behind this behavior are not well understood, but these cats sometimes learn to accept petting for short amounts of time.

Pain and sensitivity. Numerous medical conditions can cause pain and discomfort. Just as we might lash out to protect ourselves from pain or anticipated pain, cats do the same.

Protecting yourself and your cat

The first step is preventing your cat from harming you. Trim her toenails (or, if necessary for safety, take her to your veterinarian or groomer for a pedicure) so that if she scratches, she will do less damage.

The next step is to identify the triggers for the aggressive behavior. Write a list of all the circumstances surrounding the onset of the behavior, including the time of day and day of the week, interactions with other animals and people, activities involving your cat, sounds and smells. Once you've identified them, avoid the triggers (when possible) while working on resolving the undesirable behavior.

Many of the warning signs a cat shows are common to the species, but individual cats may also have their own distinctive signals. Pay attention to your cat's body language and learn to recognize the signals that occur shortly before your cat attacks. For some cats, this means dilated pupils and a change in ear position. For other cats, it means a rapidly swishing tail or a crouched, tense body posture. The goal is to recognize the signs that your cat displays before she behaves aggressively and to stop interacting with her before she gets to that point. You may get hurt by ignoring the warning signals.

Benefits of enriching the environment for cats

Enrichment of the cat's living environment can have multiple benefits for cats showing undesirable behaviors. It can relieve boredom and frustration, stimulate the mind, and provide an appropriate form of play and energy release. Many undesirable behaviors can be curbed by providing your cat with enough enrichment options. Keep in mind, though, that some forms of enrichment may not be appropriate depending on your cat's triggers, so make sure you are providing enrichment that doesn't cause your cat to be overly aroused or fearful.

How can you make your cat's life more exciting? Here are some ideas:

- Create a toy box for your cat, but keep it out of her reach. Toys that are available all the time quickly become boring. Cats love novelty and rapid movement. Rotate the toys in and out of her box every three days, so that she is only allowed to play with the toys for a few days, and then a few new and exciting toys arrive.
- Scent is important to cats, and can make a toy more exciting. Carry small toys around with you before you give them to her so that they acquire your scent, or put them outside in the garden so that they acquire the scent of the outdoors. Some cats love the smell of catnip toys. You can buy food-dispensing toys that provide your cat with entertainment without your direct involvement.
- Interactive toys (toys that you have to manipulate in order to make them fun, such as a feather attached to a wand and a string) tend to maintain cats' interest for the longest period of time. If you have an active cat, you should play with her for a minimum of 20 minutes twice daily. Don't ever use toys that involve using your hand (or any other body part) as an object of play, since you could encourage aggressive behavior by teaching your cat that it is permissible to play with (i.e., attack) your hands.

Additional suggestions for helping an aggressive cat

Managing the behavior by avoiding all circumstances that cause aggressive behavior is an appropriate solution if you are staying safe and your cat does not seem emotionally troubled. If management has improved the situation, then don't feel obligated to take further steps. However, you should seek professional help if the situation has remained static or is worsening, or if your cat has unavoidable triggers or seems anxious on a regular basis. There are veterinarians who specialize in cat care and certified feline behavior consultants. One of these professionals can offer help to you and your cat while keeping everyone safe.

In the meantime, basic behavior modification techniques that you can try include:

- Reinforce incompatible behaviors: Your cat cannot scratch your leg if he's using his scratching post.
- Reinforce behaviors you like: Reward him for calm behaviors.
- Refocus your cat's attention before he acts inappropriately: Try crinkling his favorite bag of treats or opening a small can.
- Pair scary things that are unavoidable with yummy treats: When the dishwasher being turned on means he's going to get a tuna treat, the noisy appliance becomes less scary to your cat.

Additional things that you may want to try include Feliway pheromone products and a calming collar. It's also a good idea to consult with your veterinarian. She may suggest nutritional supplements (e.g., Nutri-Calm, Zylkene, Solliquin), a change in diet or prescription medication.

There are some techniques that you should always avoid. Steer clear of the following and seek additional advice if the professional you're working with recommends them:

- Do not punish your cat. Punishment may not only cause your cat to be more aggressive, it will damage your relationship. Even punishments that are considered mild should be avoided, including spritzing a cat with a spray bottle, throwing items at the cat (or elsewhere) to cause a noise, shaking a can with something noisy in it, and prolonged isolation.
- Do not push your cat past his comfort level because it is likely to cause setbacks and hinder his progress.

Finally, put yourself in your cat's shoes: Think about how he might be feeling and try to understand his behaviors from his point of view. It's important to remain patient and supportive of your cat while keeping everyone safe. There are many professionals with considerable experience working with these issues so you can take comfort in the fact that this is not a problem unique to your cat