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# JAR's

## Aggressive Behavior in Cats

Cat owners report that biting is the second most common behavioral problem - second only to inappropriate urination. This is because personality traits are as varied in cats as they are in people. Early experiences have considerable bearing on later aggressive behavior but genetic diversity is a greater cause of problem aggression. Some cat owners just accept the unique temperaments of their pets but others find aggressive behavior intolerable and search for a cure. Unlike other personality quirks, aggressiveness can be a real problem for owners and other pets alike. Cat bites hurt and can lead to infections.

### Kitten And Adult Aggressive Play Acting

Although we keep them as pets, nature designed cats to use their claws and teeth to defend themselves and to hunt. Even the most finicky gourmet feline still has these natural urges to lay in wait, stalk and pounce. They derive great joy in attacking feet, sleeping owners and unwary birds alike. Cats love to explore, stalk anything that moves, and bat and pounce on small objects that they pretend to be prey. This activity is most pronounced in kittens during their learning period but many adult cats still love to play hunt. If you encourage this activity rest assured that it will eventually get out of hand. Kittens that play attack one another quickly learn the limits of biting and scratching. Their playmates bite back when play gets too rough. But kittens adopted out at an early age transfer the activity to their owners who don't always let them know when they have gone too far rough housing. Play aggression is easy to recognize by the exaggerated postures that cats assume. They crouch, flatten their ears, their pupils dilate and their tail

swishes back and forth while they stalk or pounce at the owner. Some cats remain "kittens" in this respect well into their adult years.

### Solution

As cute as it may seem at first, do not encourage rough play, scratching and biting. Be sure this is a rule for all family members and not just some. You can put a bell on the kitten's collar so you know where he is at and you can deny him his favorite pouncing places. You can also clap your hands or use a loud noise when you see him begin to stalk you. Some of my clients make a rattle from a tin can full of pennies and shake it to startle the kitten and redirect its attention. The problem with using startling techniques is that they tend to make the kitten shy. Then, it might be better simply not encourage the behavior and wait for them to grow out of it.

### Territory-based Aggression

Some cats are intensely territorial - even more so than dogs. In the wild cats are solitary hunters, each with its own separate territory. Territory-based aggression usually begins when cats are about a year or two old. Cats that go out of doors often become intensely possessive of the area surrounding their home. They let out a very distinctive cry if another cat should venture into their space but usually ignore strange dogs, other animals and people. Cats can become extremely upset over these incidents and may transfer their pent up aggression to other house pet or their owners. It may take them a half a day to calm down. When territory-based aggression occurs within the home, cats



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hiss, spit and growl at their housemates. When outright attacks occur the aggressor or dominant cat will be the one that jumps at another cats rear lumbar area. When wounds occur they are on the tail and loins of the more submissive cats and on the face of the aggressor. Cats in this situation often urine spray mark the house to reassert their dominance.

The cues that cats give to one another can be very subtle. Cats that live harmoniously with one another have learned to live with smaller territories - such as a favorite room - or through sharing space at different times of day. Generally, only one cat will be on a prized object such as a sofa at one time. Sharing is very precarious for cats so anything that disturbs the situation can lead to aggression and fights. A new apartment, new furniture or even moving a sofa or bed may lead to turf arguments. Adding a new cat to the household always causes stress and battles over turf and authority. When we are lucky, the cats work these arguments out over a period of months.

Territorial disputes among cats can develop gradually in the home. The most assertive cat in the household gradually begins to guard favorite objects and space and threaten or attack lesser-ranked cats in the house. Depending on the temperaments of the lesser cats, they may make concessions and cease to frequent a given area or only use it when the dominant cat is away. In these situations any of the cats may begin hiding, urine spraying, excessive licking and grooming or other stress related activity.

### Solution

When you add a new cat to the household introduce it to your

other cats in stages. Start with the new cat in a separate room in a carrier for a week or two. Enough scent from the new cat will permeate the house for your other pets to know it is there. Later, release the cat but keep it closed off in its room. When you do introduce the cats to one another do it for short supervised periods. Only when you are sure that you have control of the situation should you allow the cats to mix with one another. Even then, remember that it may take up to a year for the cats to fully adjust to a new member of the family. Give each cat a food treat to encourage good behavior.

If cats get into a fight separate them with gloves or a bath towel or blanket. If you were scratched or bitten scrub out the wound until it stings from the water and then soak it in alcohol for as long as you can tolerate. Take the separated cats to separate rooms to calm down. If you are coming back with a cat from the groomers or the vet leave them in the carrier for an hour before you release it. Punishment never works in curbing aggression in cats. It simply makes the problem worse. Your cat will become fearful or turn its resentment toward you and the other cats. Instead, simply withdraw your affection as soon as an incident occurs. Cats quickly learn that life suddenly got more boring after they became aggressive.

With the exception of hunting activity and maternal protectiveness, facial pheromones can be very helpful in calming cats. Pheromones seem to have a calming effect on cats and encourage a mellow, friendly attitude. Synthetic facial pheromone is sold under the trade name Feliway. It is marketed to discourage urine spraying but it is quite useful in managing aggression. Be careful not to



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spray it on the cat because the product contains alcohol. Instead, spray it on a folded sheet of Kleenex and rub it on the sides of the head and back of the cat once the tissue is no longer damp.

Be sure your cat(s) have plenty of scratching posts to sink their claws into and plenty of stuffed toys to attack.

Keep the toe nails of your cat clipped short. File them with an emory board if the cat will let you.

Be patient. Improvement takes time. A good way to socialize with your cat is by brushing it down with a slicker comb. Be happy with small successes and don't push the cat too much. Try to read the signals and body language that your cat is giving you before things get out of hand.

### Aggression Toward Humans

Cats that threaten their owners usually have star-crossed beginnings. If they were not adequately handled, petted and socialized when they were between five and twelve weeks of age they may grow up to be fearful, wary of people or easily upset and angered. Cats that are frightened assume a characteristic position. They crouch with their ears laid back, their tails curled inward and they tilt their bodies away from the perceived threat. They will likely lash out and claw or bite anything that approaches them. This behavior often occurs when the cat is in new surroundings or being approached by a stranger. The cat's eyes often dilate and they may hiss and show their teeth. Their hair may stand on end.

### Solution

Begin to correct the problem as soon as it first occurs. Do not wait

until the behavior is ingrained in the cat's personality. The best time to get cats used to owners, strangers and children is when they are still kittens. Take time to get kittens used to being touched everywhere and introduce them to dogs and other cats while they are still young.

To accustom a cat to be touched, begin when the cat is relaxed and content. Start off scratching and rubbing its head. Make no sudden moves. Progress to stroking its back and the base of the tail. Talk to the cat while you are doing this and watch for any signs that the cat is becoming agitated. Finish this short lesson with a food treat. Eventually the cat will enjoy being touched and handled.

Fear aggressiveness in adult cats present a much harder problem. When they feel threatened by strangers or a new owner it takes much longer to overcome the problem. Let the cat get hungry and then have the person hold the cat's favorite treat. Do not let the person approach the cat. Let the cat overcome its fear and approach the person on its own terms to develop confidence and trust. If the cat is too shy to approach have a member of the family with whom the cat has a good relationship give the treat while the second person is in the house. Over a series of weeks the visitor can be closer and closer when the treat is offered.

### Redirected Aggression

Redirected aggression is a phenomenon frequently seen in cats and parrots. In this situation a strange person or animal upsets the cat. But instead of showing aggression toward this new individual the cat turns its wrath on the pet owner(s) or another pet. We see



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the same event occurring in marriages when an agitated wife or husband takes out his or her frustration on their spouse. When redirected aggression occurs it can destroy the bonds between cat and cat and cat and owner that took years to establish. Sometimes it is not more than a stray cat passing by the window that sets off such a confrontation. If a lower ranking cat becomes the object of redirected aggression it may defend itself, leading to a serious cat fight.

### Solution

First try to decide what the stimulus was for the aggression and remove it. Lower the blinds on the window if a stray cat has approached and shoo it away. If the aggression is directed at you leave the cat alone until it calms down. Do not punish or yell at the cat. If the cat is being aggressive with housemates place each cat in a separate closed room. Turn off the lights in the rooms. Interactions with a cat during this problem are counterproductive. If the cat is highly agitated it is best to wrap it in a beach towel when handling it. Calm your pet and praise it. Once the agitated cat has calmed down, reintroduce the cats slowly. Place them far apart in a room and stroke and praise each one. A food treat comes in very handy in these situations. Remember, even faint smells of another cat can trigger redirected aggression. That is why cats returning from the animal hospital are sometimes attacked by their housemates.

### Aggression Due to Medical Problems

If it is unclear why your cat has suddenly become aggressive the

first thing to do is to take it to see a veterinarian whom you trust. Be very cautious placing these cats in carriers and under no circumstance bring the pet to the veterinarian without a carrier. If a thorough physical exam does not indicate a problem an X-ray might. In some cats arthritis of the spine or limbs is the root problem. These cats will often growl and hiss when picked up or handled. Other cats develop neurological conditions that lead to sudden intense pain. These sudden twinges of pain are called "ghost pains". Often it is the spine and tail that seem affected. The skin over the spine of these cats may ripple during an episode.

### Solution

When arthritis is the cause of aggressive behavior doctors often try the cat on aspirin therapy at 4-8mg/pound. Unfortunately it has been found that less than half the cats can tolerate aspirin even when it is only given every second or third day. Cats do handle chondroitin and glucosamine anti-arthritis supplements well and in a few cases these drugs are effective. We do not know why cats develop ghost pains but they often disappear when the cat is placed on birth control medications such as medroxyprogesterone acetate (Depo-Prevera). Some of these cases may be a form of epilepsy. When this is suspected they can be placed on a trial dosage of phenobarbital, a drug used to control epilepsy. Still other cases turn out to have the "dry" form of feline infectious peritonitis, a chronic and terminal disease caused by a coronavirus. It has been heard that cats with severe dental disease can also show personality changes, but it is the doctor who must evaluate this possibility.



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### Non-Recognition Aggression

Occasionally in multi-cat households removing a cat for a period of time leads to aggression on the part of cats that remained in the household. The cats at issue are often returning from the veterinarian, groomer or boarding cattery with strange odors still lingering on them. Without the "right" odor the other cats do not recognize these cats as the same animal that left. If the cats get into a fight their relationships can take a long time to repair.

If you do take your cats to the groomer or veterinarian take them all along for the ride in separate kennels. Place the kennels side by side until late in the evening before releasing the cats and try to release them in a neutral area that the cats rarely frequent. Feeding each cat a pungent canned treat before releasing him or her also helps. Some cat owners mist feline pheromone spray into the air in these situations.

### Your-Time-To-Pet-Me-Is-Up

Cats that seem immensely pleased by your petting only to suddenly whirl around and bite you have always perplexed me. These cats purr up to the moment they attack. Some say that this is due to the cat's short attention span. That there is a fine line between what is pleasurable and what is annoying. Others think these displays occur when a sensitive area on the body has been touched. Some cats will beg for attention only to sink their teeth into you a few minutes later.

### Solution

Release your cat at the first sign it has had enough petting. Some

signs that you are approaching the limits of the cat's tolerance are restlessness, tail twitching, flattened ears, twitching ears and a tendency to move its head toward your hand. One can attempt to deprogram these cats by feeding them a tasty treat just before you think they might attack. But it is difficult to find a solution for the Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde cats whose tempers turn on a dime. Hereafter, you just can accept their idiosyncrasies, and sterilize the cuts and scratches with iodine and alcohol.

### Dominance-based Aggression

A few cats treat owners like another cat in the household and attempt to dominate them in a peck order or hierarchy. These cats may growl or hiss when you join them on the bed or attempt to move them. Some will block doorways and show the typical signs of aggression such as tail switching, dilated pupils, flattened ears, and hissing and spitting. Signs of aggression between cats are often subtle. Some owners misread the maneuvers of these cats as simple play. Cats that are not dominant in these situations often lose their potty training and look unkempt. Generally dominant cats are cats that are highly territorial as well. Cats do not reach social maturity until they are about two years old so sometimes this problem can be late in occurring.

### Solution

The best way to handle these cats is to withhold love, attention and treats until the cat is mellow and relaxed. Relaxed cats carry their tails and head high. They stand high on their paws with small eye pupils and a portion of the third eyelid showing. Punishment



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only makes the problem worse. The use of pheromone mist around the house can be very helpful as can food treats given at just the right moment.

### Maternal Aggression

All mother cats are very protective of their kittens and may react violently if they perceive a threat to the kittens. Some queens react by moving their kittens around restlessly when they perceive a threat. Others may attack people, other cats and dogs that they normally trust or ignore.

### Solution

Disturb cats with young kittens as little as possible. Aggressive behavior will subside as the kittens grow older. Let your cat give birth in a low-stress environment without foot traffic or the presence of other cats. If you must handle nursing mothers put a little tuna juice on your hand first. Better yet, spay your cats.

### Instinctive Hunting Behavior

First of all, never let your cat outdoors unsupervised. Cats have a normal urge to kill small prey, be it wild birds and rodents or the pet canary. It is unrealistic to expect them to change. A cat on the prowl looks like a miniature tiger stalking its prey.

### Solution

Keeping your cat indoors solves most of these problems. If you have indoor pocket pets be sure they are out of reach of your cat. Never assume that because your cat usually shows fondness for a

small animal or bird that it will not one day treat it like prey.

### Medications For Aggression

When you can anticipate short periods of stress in your cats diazepam (Valium) is a very useful medication. However, with time cats become resistant to the effect of diazepam so it is only useful for very short periods. Acepromazine tranquilizers also work well. If you want to give any tranquilizers to your cat, please first visit the Vet and ask what treatment is best for your cat.



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