



MANAGING YOUR KITTEN'S ROUGH PLAY

Play-motivated aggressive behaviors are common in young, active cats less than two years of age, and in cats that live in one-cat households. When cats play they normally incorporate a variety of behaviors into their play, such as exploratory, investigative, and predatory behaviors. Play provides young cats with opportunities to practice skills they would historically need for survival. Kittens like to explore new areas and investigate anything that moves, and may bat at, pounce on, and bite objects that resemble prey.

Kittens learn how to inhibit their bite from their littermates and their mother. A kitten that is separated from their family too early may play more roughly than a kitten that has had more valuable family time. In addition, if humans play with a young kitten using their hands and/or feet instead of toys, the kitten is liable to learn that rough play with people is okay. In most cases, it's possible to teach your kitten or young adult cat that rough play isn't acceptable behavior.

ENCOURAGE ACCEPTABLE BEHAVIOR

Redirect your kitten's aggressive behavior onto acceptable objects like toys. Drag a toy along the floor to encourage your kitten to pounce on it, or throw a toy away from your kitten to give them even more exercise chasing the toy down. Some kittens will even bring the toy back to be thrown again! Another good toy is one that your kitten can wrestle with, like a soft stuffed toy that's about the size of your kitten, so they can grab it with both front feet, bite it, and kick it with their back feet. This is one of the ways kittens play with each other, especially when they're young. It's also one of the ways they try to play with human feet and hands, so it's important to provide this type of alternative play target. Encourage play with a "wrestling toy" by rubbing it against your kitten's belly when they want to play roughly — be sure to get your hand out of the way as soon as your kitten accepts the toy.

Since kittens need a lot of playtime, try to set up three or four consistent times during the day to initiate play with your kitten. This will help them understand that they don't have to be the one to initiate play by pouncing on you.

DISCOURAGE UNACCEPTABLE BEHAVIOR

You need to set the rules for your kitten's behavior, and every person your cat comes in contact with should reinforce these rules. Your kitten can't be expected to learn that it's okay to play roughly with Dad, but not with the baby.

- Redirect the behavior by offering them a toy to wrestle with or to chase. This will encourage them to direct their rough play onto a toy instead of a person. We recommend that you keep a stash of toys hidden in each room specifically for this purpose.
- Withdraw attention when your kitten starts to play too roughly. If the distraction and redirection techniques don't seem to be working, the most drastic thing you can do to discourage your cat from rough play is to withdraw all attention when they start playing too roughly. Your kitten wants to play with you, and eventually figure out how far they can go if you keep this limit consistent. The best way to withdraw your attention is to walk away to another room, and close the door long enough for them to calm down. If you pick your kitten to put them in another room, then you're rewarding the behavior by touching them. You should be the one to leave the room.

Please Note: None of these methods will be very effective unless you also give your kitten acceptable outlets for their energy, by playing with them regularly using appropriate toys.

WHAT NOT TO DO

- Attempts to tap, flick, or hit your kitten for rough play are almost guaranteed to backfire. Your kitten could become afraid of your hands, or could interpret those flicks as playful moves by you and play even more roughly as a result.

- Picking up your kitten to put them into a “timeout” could reinforce their behavior because they probably enjoy the physical contact of being picked up. By the time you get them to the timeout room and close the door, they probably had already forgotten what they did to be put in that situation.

AGGRESSION

Kittens can bite or scratch through the skin. In these cases it’s best to seek help from a behavior specialist to work with your kitten’s behavior. Be sure to keep your kitten confined until you can get professional help. Also, be sure to thoroughly clean all bites and scratches.