

How to Take the Aggression Out of Playtime

By Shelley Thayer
Executive Director, Cat Depot

According to Ron Hines, DVM, PhD, biting and scratching are common behavioral frustrations for cat owners, second only to inappropriate urination. Early experiences with rough play and inappropriate interaction can greatly influence aggressive behavior in cats later in life. Varied personalities, as well as genetic traits, fear and ill health, may also have a bearing on behavior. However, a nurturing environment, proper handling and consistent training will help promote a loving and safe relationship between you and your cat.

We have all had the urge to tickle a kitten's tummy until they grab and nip. This may look like cute behavior, but as the kitten grows into an adult, the nip can turn into a painful bite. Fingers should



Above, using your fingers as "toys" with kittens may encourage nipping, which may seem cute when cats are young, but can later turn into painful bites. At right, encouraging play with toys that promote chasing, batting, swatting pouncing or carrying around prey reduces "attack play" and promotes playful rather than predator behavior. Photo of Sonny, above, and Domino, at right, by Marilyn Warner of Cat Depot

never be used as toys. Poking or rustling fingers will encourage your cat's prey instinct to attack and bite. Instead, always use a toy. Dangling toys are wonderful entertainment for kittens and a great way to expend energy safely.

Kittens will wrestle and nip as a form of play, but they must learn at an early age that it is not appropriate to bite. Nipping faces or hands should never be encouraged as play.

"You want to send a clear message concerning what is and isn't an acceptable target," says feline behavior expert, Pam Johnson-Bennett. Small toys, a ball in a bag and anything not attached to your body is acceptable.

Older cats will also benefit from play time and letting off steam.

"It's important to give a cat an appropriate outlet to release energy," says Johnson-Bennett. This will help cut down the "ambush biting," a common scenario in which a cat suddenly dashes out and bites, usually around your ankles. It's a "chase-the-prey" game, and more appropriate games will help control this behavior."

Kittens who play with their litter mates will learn that playing rough may result in a harsh nip from a sibling. Kittens who are taken away from their litter mates at an early age may not learn this lesson, resulting in attack play with their owners. When

this happens, the cat should be encouraged to redirect its focus on a toy. Cat owners often say that they can see the "attack" coming.

One way to stop the play attack is to firmly say, "No," toss a toy and follow through with praise for good behavior. Some people shake an empty soda can with a few coins in it; the loud noise causes a distraction. Others use a squirt bottle, but only at the time of the attack. This technique should not be used as a punishment, but, instead, as a deterrent.

Attacking any object that moves should always be stopped immediately. The longer inappropriate behavior is allowed, the more difficult it is to change.

Individuals often describe a



*Shelley Thayer,
Executive Director, Cat Depot*

cat's playful aggression as, "being mean" or "turning vicious" when, in actuality, the cat is doing what it was allowed or encouraged to do when he or she was a kitten. Playful behavior can resemble predator behavior, especially when the "attacks" target ankles, feet and hands. However, this behavior can be easily modified by increasing and encouraging opportunities for appropriate play with all kinds of toys that imitate chasing, batting, swatting, pouncing and carrying around prey.

Another perplexing behavior, called



“petting-induced aggression,” occurs when a cat that seems perfectly content being petted suddenly bites. Over stimulation is often to blame, along with a short attention span, sensitivity issues on specific parts of the cat’s body or simply drawing a fine line between a pleasurable experience and one that is no longer tolerable. On the other hand, a normally docile cat who suddenly becomes sensitive should always be taken to a veterinarian for a check up.

Although seemingly unprovoked, cats often provide subtle clues to the approaching attack, such as a twitching or thumping tail, flattened or twitching ears, skin rippling, body position changes or head movements. When this happens, immediately stop petting the cat and give him or her some space.

Occasionally, a cat will treat its owner like another cat. He may hiss or growl when he is joined on the couch or bed, or he may dominate the stairs and doorways. The best solution is to withhold love and attention until the cat becomes relaxed. Do not punish the cat, but wait for him to join you on his own terms.

To ensure a happy and healthy, bite-free relationship, nurture kindness and provide stimulating toys and activities for your cat. And remember—despite the best training, accidents can happen. So, keep your cat’s nails trimmed, your fingers to yourself and enjoy the love and special joy that is nurtured by living with a cat. ❀

Cat Depot, one of the largest no-kill, nonprofit feline adoption centers in the nation, is dedicated to saving lives. Open seven days a week, Cat Depot is located at 2542 17th Street in Sarasota. For more information, call 941-366-2404 or visit www.CatDepot.org.