



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 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 normally 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 her 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 is possible to teach your kitten or young adult cat that rough play is not an acceptable behavior.

Encourage Acceptable Behavior

Redirect your kitten's aggressive behavior toward 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 him even more exercise chasing the toy. Some kittens will even bring the toy back to be thrown again! A good toy is one that your kitten can wrestle with, like a soft stuffed toy that's about the size of your kitten, so he can grab it with both front feet, bite it, and kick it with his 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 he wants to play roughly - be sure to get your hand out of the way as soon as he 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. This will help him understand that *he* does not 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 rough with Dad, but not with the baby.

Use aversives to discourage your kitten from nipping. You can either use a squirt bottle filled with water to squirt your kitten when he becomes too rough. For more information on aversives, see our handout: "*Aversives for Cats.*" Remember that aversives will work only if you offer your kitten acceptable alternatives.

Redirect the behavior after using the aversive. After you startle your kitten with the aversive, IMMEDIATELY offer him a toy to wrestle with or chase. This will encourage him to direct his 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 do not seem to be working, the most drastic thing you can do to discourage your cat from rough play is to withdraw all attention when he starts playing too roughly. He wants to play with you, so eventually he will figure out how far he 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 him to calm down. If you pick the kitten up to put him in another room, then you are rewarding his actions by touching him. You must 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 his energy by playing with him regularly using appropriate toys.

What Not to Do

Attempts to tap, flick or hit your kitten to stop rough play are almost guaranteed to backfire. He could become afraid of your hands, or he could interpret these as playful moves by you and play even rougher as a result.

Picking up your kitten to put him into a “timeout” could reinforce his behavior because he probably enjoys the physical contact of being picked up. By the time you get him to the timeout room and close the door, he has probably already forgotten what he did to be put in that situation.

Aggression

Kittens can scratch or bite through the skin. In these cases, it is best to seek help for your kitten’s behavior from a qualified Behavior Consultant. Be sure to keep your kitten confined until you can get professional help. Also, be sure to thoroughly clean all bites and scratches and consult your physician, as cat scratches and bites can easily become infected.

For more information about pet behavior and training, please **visit our website at michiganhumane.org.**