



## **Managing Rough Play and Unwanted Behavior**

Behaviors that may appear aggressive are often simply play-motivated, especially young, active cats and in cats that never quite learned what “appropriate” behavior looks like. Cats incorporate exploratory, investigative, and predatory behaviors into their play. This 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 its 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 cat that rough play and other unwanted behaviors, are not acceptable. Here are some ways to accomplish that:

### **Encourage Acceptable Behavior**

Redirect your kitten or cat’s aggressive behavior onto acceptable objects like toys. Drag a toy along the floor to encourage your cat to pounce on it, or throw a toy away from your cat to give him/her more exercise chasing the toy down. Another good toy is something your cat can wrestle with, like a soft stuffed toy. Rub it on your cat’s belly to initiate play and so s/he can grab it with both front feet, bite it, and kick with the back feet. This is one of the ways kittens play with each other, especially when they’re young, so it’s important to provide this type of alternative play target to avoid your hands and feet from becoming the target.

### **Discourage Unacceptable Behavior**

Set rules for your cat’s behavior, and every person your cat comes in contact with should reinforce these rules. Your cat 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 cat from nipping.** A squirt bottle filled with water and a small amount of vinegar or a can of pressurized air to squirt your cat when he/she becomes too rough are effective techniques.
- **Redirect the behavior after using the aversive.** Immediately offer a toy for your cat to wrestle with or chase. This will encourage your cat to direct its rough play onto a toy instead of a person.

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- **Withdraw attention when your cat 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. Your cat will learn quickly that if he/she plays too roughly the fun stops.

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

## What Not To Do

- **Tap, flick, or hit your cat for playing too roughly.** This is almost guaranteed to backfire because your cat could become afraid of your hands or interpret those flicks as playful moves and play even more roughly as a result.
- **Picking up your cat.** This could reinforce the behavior because your cat probably enjoys the physical contact.

## Other Deterrents for Cats

Determining an effective aversive reaction for your cat is definitely a case of trial-and-error, as individual preferences will vary with each cat. This is often the best method to discourage a cat from a particular action or place, but will seldom work effectively without offering an alternative that is both convenient and rewarding.

- **Texture:** shelf paper (sticky side up), double-sided carpet tape, heavy foil, or irregular rocks in house planters.
- **Smell:** citrus odors (or fresh peels), some colognes, or aloe gel.
- **Taste:** bitter apple, cayenne pepper, some hot sauces, or fresh peels.
- **Surprise:** spray bottle or squirt gun filled with water or a mild combination of water and vinegar, air horn, whistle, or shaker can. Note: use these options to get your cat's attention, and thereby offer an appropriate alternative.

*Warning: For fearful cats, try everything else before trying surprise techniques, especially those using noises!*