



Managing Rough Play in Cats

UNDERSTANDING ROUGH PLAY

Rough play is normal behavior in kittens and young cats as it helps them develop coordination, hunting skills, and social behaviors. However, it can sometimes lead to injuries when directed toward humans. Playful aggression can involve stalking, pouncing, biting, and scratching, which may be misinterpreted as true aggression.

THE PREY SEQUENCE IN CAT PLAY

Cats' play behavior follows a natural prey sequence that mimics their hunting instincts:

1. **Staring:** The cat focuses intently on the "prey," whether it's a toy or a moving object.
2. **Stalking and Chasing:** The cat crouches low and moves slowly or suddenly rushes toward the target.
3. **Pouncing and Grabbing:** With a burst of energy, the cat jumps at the prey, using its paws to trap it.
4. **Performing a Kill Bite:** The cat bites down, often while kicking with its back legs, simulating a killing move.

Recognizing this sequence can help you manage your cat's energy during play and prevent rough play from escalating.

SIGNS OF PLAY AGGRESSION

- **Playful Indicators:** Play face (open, almost grinning mouth), sideways hopping, and exaggerated movements.
- **True Aggression:** Growling, hissing, or spitting. These behaviors suggest fear or overstimulation, not play.

PREVENTING ROUGH PLAY

To prevent rough play from escalating, it's important to establish boundaries early and offer alternative outlets for a cat's energy.

Use Appropriate Toys

Always use toys to interact with your cat, never hands or feet. Provide a variety of toys, such as:

- Wand toys (fishing pole style) that imitate the movements of prey
- Balls, small mice, or feather toys for chasing
- Sturdy stuffed toys for grabbing, biting, and kicking
- Puzzle feeders to stimulate hunting instincts during solo play

Set a Play Schedule

Cats, especially young ones, need regular play sessions to burn off excess energy:

- **Duration:** 10-15 minutes at least twice a day.
- **Timing:** Play when your cat is most active, typically in the mornings and evenings.
- End play sessions gradually and, if possible, follow with a meal to mimic natural hunting and eating behavior.

Avoid Encouraging Rough Play

- Never play using hands or feet, as this encourages cats to associate body parts with toys.
- Use long toys to maintain a safe distance between you and your cat's claws and teeth.
- If a kitten is already roughhousing with hands, stop all interaction the moment it bites or scratches.

WHAT TO DO IF PLAY BECOMES ROUGH

- **Redirect Aggression:** As soon as your cat starts to play rough, offer an alternative, like a toy, to divert their attention. Keep small toys handy in each room for quick redirection.
- **Time-outs:** If rough play continues, immediately stop all interaction. Leave the room or ignore the cat for a few minutes. Don't pick the cat up, as this may be seen as part of the play and could provoke more aggression.
- **Startling Interruptions:** A sudden, loud noise like clapping or saying "Ouch" in a high-pitched tone can interrupt aggressive play. Once the cat stops, throw a toy to shift their focus.

WHAT NOT TO DO

- **Avoid Physical Punishment:** Never hit or flick your cat. It can escalate rough behavior or make your cat fearful of you.
- **Don't Run from Your Cat:** Running can trigger a chase instinct, making the play more intense.
- **Don't Use Hands as Toys:** Even with gloves, using your hands as a toy teaches cats that biting human body parts is acceptable.

ADDITIONAL TIPS

- **Provide Environmental Enrichment:** Offer cardboard boxes, paper bags, shelves, cat trees and scratching posts to keep your cat entertained.
- **Consider a Playmate:** If your cat has a lot of energy, adopting another playful cat of similar temperament can reduce the need for rough play with humans.

CONSISTENCY IS KEY

Every member of the household should enforce these rules. Consistency helps the cat understand boundaries, reducing the likelihood of confusion or mixed signals that could lead to aggression.