

Understanding Aggression in Cats

What is Aggression?

As humans we tend to associate aggression with “bad” people or animals trying to hurt someone. However, the things we label as “aggression” in animals are often a form of communication. Cats don’t have a voice and must use their bodies, including their claws and mouths, to make their point sometimes. Just as a human might raise their voice for a variety of reasons, cats use aggressive behaviors in many ways, for many reasons. These include:

- Communicating that they are scared, uncomfortable, or in pain
- Hunting and playing
- Setting boundaries about how others interact with them

When your cat shows aggressive behaviors, that doesn’t make them “bad”, antisocial, or damaged; any cat will use these tools when they need them to communicate or protect themselves. In many cases, aggressive behaviors are **normal but undesirable**. Of course, this doesn’t mean you can’t do anything to decrease the behavior!

Managing Common Types of Aggression

Understanding why your cat is using aggressive behavior can help you change their behavior. After pain and illness, the four below are the most common types of aggression.

IMPORTANT: If your cat is suddenly showing new aggressive behavior, they may be in pain or feeling sick. Always start with a vet visit if your cat has a change in behavior.

Playful Aggression

Playful aggression is very common in kittens or young cats. For cats, play is largely made up of hunting behaviors like pouncing, chasing, scratching, and biting. This can, unfortunately, get directed at people or other pets, especially if they’re moving. People often describe playful aggression as “random” because the cat will suddenly pounce even if no one was interacting with them. This kind of behavior is most common in the mornings and evenings.

Playful aggression is very normal but misplaced behavior. Rather than trying to eliminate it, you can teach your cat to target their toys instead. Regular play opportunities are especially important and necessary for these cats. Check out the handout called **Bust Boredom for Better Behavior** for ideas.

Fearful Aggression

Unlike in playful aggression, fearfully aggressive cats rarely come toward their target. Instead the behavior is directed at a person or animal who approaches, corners, or restrains them. The cat’s body becomes tense and tight, their pupils get round, their ears go back or sideways, and they may hiss or growl before escalating to swatting or biting. Occasionally a fearful cat may proactively try to chase a threat away, especially if they have been cornered in the past.

Fear is a normal emotion that becomes a problem when your cat is fearful of common or necessary situations in their life. Cats don’t “get over” fear with continue exposure; instead they often start reacting

more quickly and strongly in an effort to escape. Give your cat raised perches off the ground and safe places to hide when they want to. Don't force them to interact but use play and food to build a bond. See the handout on **Helping Your Fearful Cat** for more information.

Cat-Cat Aggression

While aggression toward other cats in a home doesn't often cause injuries, it can be very stressful and lead to other problems like litter box avoidance. Cats may be fine together sometimes and only have occasional issues, or they may not be able to stay in a room together without conflict.

Aggression toward another cat is usually part of communication between the cats. They may be saying "don't come closer" or "don't touch me." Some hissing and growling may be normal between unfamiliar cats getting to know each other's boundaries. Or one cat may use aggressive behavior to enforce boundaries with another (especially between a younger cat and an older one). This only becomes a problem if that communication is ignored or if it is escalated to more intense aggression that causes worsening stress or injuries.

GOOD TO KNOW: Cat play looks a lot like aggression. If both the cats have loose bodies and if they are stopping and starting but staying near each other, they are probably just playing!

Typically cat-cat aggression can be lessened with proper home setup including having plenty of raised perches, and spreading out litter boxes, food/water stations, and other important resources. This decreases competition and lets cats avoid each other if they need to. Regular play will also help in the case of mismatched energy levels. The handouts called **Introducing Cats** and **Creating Good Habits for Life** have more information on cat-cat interactions and home setup.

Petting Aggression

Biting or scratching during petting (also called "overstimulation") is a common problem for cat owners. The cat seems perfectly happy and enjoying the petting, then they don't. The suddenness of this behavior can be confusing and frustrating. However, most cats have warning signs like a swishing tail, a turned head, a rippling back, or even an attempt to move away. Other cats may react after a certain length of time or when particular places on their body are touched.

This type of aggression is used to tell a person that the cat feel overwhelmed or irritated. Something that felt good at first now feels uncomfortable. The cat tries to give signs but because cat body language is subtle, those signs are often missed so the cat escalates to get their point across. The best thing to do in this case is to learn your cat's warning signs and respect them. See the handout **Feline Body Language** to learn more. It can also help to have other ways of interacting such as play and trick training.

HELP IS AVAILABLE: While aggression can be a normal reaction, it can also be serious and difficult to deal with. Work with your vet and contact a professional behavior consultant to help you.

Silicon Valley Pet Project is here to help! Visit our website at www.svpetchproject.org or email us at info@svpetproject.org.

This material was written in collaboration with cat behavior consultant Jessica Char. Learn more at www.FelineEngineering.com.