Understanding Cat Aggression Towards People

Cat owners sometimes have difficulty understanding why their cats seem friendly and content one minute and may suddenly bite and scratch them the next. Aggressive behaviors are part of the normal behavioral patterns of almost any animal species. Cat bites are seldom reported, but probably occur more frequently than dog bites. Aggressive cats can be dangerous, so attempting to resolve a cat aggression problem often requires assistance from an animal behavior specialist who is knowledgeable about cat behavior.

Types of Aggression

Play Aggression
Play-motivated aggressive behaviors are commonly observed in young, active cats less than two years of age, that live in one-cat households. Play incorporates a variety of behaviors, such as exploratory, investigative and predatory, and provides young cats with opportunities to practice skills they would normally need for survival. For example, kittens like to explore new areas and investigate anything that moves, and may bat at, pounce on, and bite objects that resemble prey.

Playful aggression often occurs when an unsuspecting owner comes down the stairs, steps out of the bathtub, rounds a corner, or even moves under the bedcovers while sleeping. These playful attacks may result in scratches and inhibited bites which don't break the skin. People sometimes inadvertently initiate aggressive behavior by encouraging their cat to chase or bite at their hands and feet during play. The body postures seen during play aggression resemble the postures a cat would normally show when searching for or catching prey. A cat may freeze in a low crouch before pouncing, twitch her tail, flick her ears back and forth, and/or wrap her front feet around a person's hands or feet while biting. These are all normal cat behaviors, whether they're seen during play or are part of an actual predatory sequence. Most play aggression can be successfully redirected to appropriate targets, however, it may still result in injury (see our handout: "Managing Your Kitten's Rough Play").

"Don't Pet Me Anymore" Aggression
Some cats will suddenly bite while they're being petted. This behavior isn't well understood, even by experienced animal behaviorists. For whatever reason, petting which the cat was previously enjoying, apparently becomes unpleasant. Biting is the cat's signal that she has had enough petting. Cats vary in how much they'll tolerate being petted or held. Although people often describe their cats as biting "out of the blue" or without warning, cats do generally give several signals before biting.

You should become more aware of your cat's body postures, and cease petting or stop any other kind of interaction before a bite occurs. Signals to be aware of include:

- Restlessness
- Your cat's tail beginning to twitch
- Your cat's ears turning back or flicking back and forth
- Your cat turning or moving her head toward your hand

When you observe any of these signals, it's time to stop petting your cat immediately and allow her to sit quietly on your lap or go her own way, whichever she prefers. Any kind of physical punishment almost always makes the problem worse, because your cat is more likely to bite either because she is fearful and/or because petting becomes even more unpleasant if it's associated with punishment.

If you want to try to prolong the amount of time your cat will tolerate petting, use some food rewards. When your cat first begins to show any of the behaviors described above (or even before she does so) offer her a special tidbit of food like a tiny piece of tuna or boiled chicken. At the same time, decrease the intensity of your petting. Continue to lightly pet your cat for a short time period while offering her tidbits. In this way, she'll come to associate petting with pleasant things and it may help her to enjoy petting for longer time periods. Each time you

work with your cat, try to pet her a little longer each time using the food as a reward. Be sure to stop the petting before she shows any aggression. If a display of aggression results in the petting being stopped, then this unacceptable behavior has worked.

Fearful/Defensive Aggression
Cats that are fearful may display body postures which appear to be similar to canine submissive postures - crouching on the floor, ears back, tail tucked, and possibly rolling slightly to the side. Cats in this posture are not submissive – they're fearful and defensive and may attack if touched (see our handout: "The Fearful Cat").

Redirected Aggression
Redirected aggression occurs when a cat is aroused into an aggressive response by one person or animal, but then redirects this aggression onto another person or animal. For example, if two family cats have a spat, the losing cat, still aroused, may walk up and attack the family child.

Territorial Aggression
Cats are highly territorial, even more so than dogs, however, they usually only feel the need to defend their territory from other cats. Territorial aggression in cats isn't commonly directed at people.

What to Do
- Check first with your veterinarian to rule out any medical reasons for your cat's aggressive behavior.
- Seek professional help. An aggression problem won't go away by itself. Working with aggression problems requires in-home help from an animal behavior specialist.
- Take precautions. Your first priority is to keep everyone safe. Supervise, confine and/or restrict your cat's activities until you can obtain professional help. You're liable for your cat's behavior.

What Not To Do
- You should never attempt to handle a fearful or aggressive cat. Cat bites and scratches become infected easily. If you do receive an injury from your cat, clean the wound carefully and contact your physician.
- Punishment won't help and will only make the problem worse. If the aggression is motivated by fear, punishment will make your cat more fearful, and therefore more aggressive.

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