



## **Aggressive Behavior in Cats**

Some cats exhibit aggressive behavior from time to time. Cats can become aggressive when they have had enough petting, when they are picked up, when they are frightened, and even when they are playing. This is a natural response and one that may be hard to change. It is important that you learn how to read your cat's moods and body language and know what things cause her to become aggressive so that you can avoid an aggressive attack. In some cases you may be able to use behavior modification to change your cats behavior. Listed below are several types of cat aggression and the recommended treatment.

**Never physically punish a cat for showing aggression. This will only make the situation worse. Cats who are physically punished will only become more aggressive.**

**Fearful or Defensive Aggression** – Cats can become defensively aggressive when scared. The best way to deal with defensive aggression is to remove the fearful stimuli. If the fearful stimuli cannot be removed, you can work to slowly change your cat's feelings about it using counter conditioning. To do this, pair an extra special treat (tuna, chicken, etc.) or a fun play session with the presence of the scary thing. Do this over and over until a new association is formed. If it is a dog your cat is afraid of, make sure your dog is never allowed to chase the cat.

**Play Aggression** – Cats are naturally aggressive in play because their play mimics aspects of the hunt – stalk, chase, and attack. Learn to anticipate when your cat becomes playfully aggressive (whenever you walk by the dresser, when you dangle your hand over the side of the chair, or when you move your feet under the covers) so that you can redirect the attack onto a toy. Have a small toy ready and the second before your cat attacks you – toss the toy. Cats have motion sensitive vision – if they see something move fast across their line of vision, they will chase it. If your cat does pounce on your moving body part - simply stop moving it - hold perfectly still so that you are no fun to attack.

- **Play Therapy** - It is important to play with your cat on a regular basis in order to provide her with an outlet for her playful energy. Toss a ball or wadded up piece of paper for her to chase, use a fishing pole type toy like a feather dancer to stimulate her to chase and  
Courtesy of Kelley Bollen, MS, Certified Animal Behavior Consultant

pounce, or provide interactive toys like round-a-bouts or treat dispensers. If your play session occurs at about the same time every day (cats love routine) your cat will start to anticipate the fun and reserve play for this time.

**Redirected Aggression** – Cats often redirect their aggressive feelings about one thing (a cat outside the window) onto someone else (you or another pet). A cat can stay agitated for a long time, sometimes up to 24 hours, and in this state they often attack the first thing that comes their way. It is important that you do not interact with your cat when she looks agitated (ears back, huge pupils, hair standing up, twitching or wagging tail). Just leave her alone until she has calmed down. If your cat becomes agitated by cats outside the window try preventing visual access using blinds or shades.

**Petting-Induced Aggression** – Some cats have a very low threshold for tolerating petting. Your cat may be fine for five pats but on the sixth one she attacks. These types of attacks could be caused by a buildup of static electricity, you touched a sensitive body part like the stomach or simply that your cat has a limit for tactile stimulation. The important thing to do to prevent such an attack is to learn your cats threshold level and don't exceed it. The body signals that tell you that your cat is becoming agitated with petting include: ears back, huge pupils, tail twitching, or skin on the back twitching. When you see these signs – stop petting.

**Inter-Cat Aggression** – This is a common form of aggression because cats are very territorial animals who are very particular about their social partners. Adult cats are less likely to accept new cats into the household and may show aggression to the new comer at first. Aggression between cats can also be status or rank related. They may simply be trying to work out who is the boss. Sometimes resident cats, who usually live peacefully together, will start to attack each other. This breakdown of peaceful coexistence could have been triggered by just about anything. Examples of things that could have occurred are: one cat just came back from the vets office and smells funny; one cat redirected aggression onto the other after seeing a strange cat outside and they continue to fight; one cat is sick and easily agitated. You may be able to help get the cats back to a peaceful coexistence by providing food treats and fun play sessions only when the cats are in each other's presence.

**Sometimes aggression is a sign of illness or pain. If your normally loving cat suddenly starts showing aggressive behavior you may want to consult with your veterinarian.**