



Managing Kitten Rough Play

Play-motivated aggressive behaviors are common in young, active cats less than two years of age, and in cats that live in one-cat households who don't have enough mental and physical stimulation. When cats play, they incorporate a variety of behaviors into their play, such as exploratory, investigative, and predatory behaviors.

Play provides cats with opportunities to practice skills they would normally need for survival. Cats 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. If humans play with a kitten or young cat using their hands and/or feet instead of toys, the cat is liable to learn that rough play with people is okay. You can teach them this isn't acceptable behavior by encouraging acceptable types of play.

Encourage Acceptable Behavior

Redirect your young 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 her even more exercise chasing the toy down. Some cats will even bring the toy back to be thrown again! Another good toy is one that your cat can wrestle with, like a soft stuffed toy that's about the size of your cat, so she can grab it with both front feet, bite it, and kick it with her back feet. This is one of the ways they try to play with human feet and hands, so it's important to provide this type of alternative play target. Since young cats need a lot of playtime, try to set up three or four consistent times during the day to initiate play with your cat. This will help her understand that she doesn't have to be the one to initiate play by pouncing on you.

Discourage Unacceptable Behavior

You need to set the rules for your young cat's behavior, and every person that 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.

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 her rough play is to withdraw all attention when she starts playing too roughly. She wants to play with you, so eventually she'll figure out how far she can go if you keep this limit consistent. The best way to withdraw your attention is to walk away to another room, and close the door long enough for her to calm down. If you pick her up to put her in another room, then you're possibly rewarding her by touching her. You should be the one to leave the room.

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

What Not To Do

Attempts to tap, flick, or hit your cat for rough play is almost guaranteed to backfire. Your cat could become afraid of your hands, or she could interpret those flicks as playful moves by you and play even more roughly as a result.

Revised: June 2020