

Understanding your Feisty Cat

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

Times when your cat may become feisty

Play: Play incorporates a variety of exploratory, investigative and hunting/predatory behaviors and provides young cats with opportunities to practice skills they would need for survival. Kittens like to explore and investigate anything that moves. They may bat at, pounce on, leap at and bite objects that resemble prey, or are in motion, such as your legs as you walk past.

The body postures seen during play 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 behavior can be successfully redirected to appropriate targets such as appropriate toys.

Prey type behavior often occurs when an unsuspecting owner comes down the stairs, steps out of the tub, rounds a corner, or even moves under a blanket while sleeping. Don't make the mistake of inadvertently initiating prey behavior by encouraging your cat to chase or bite at hands and feet during play.

Petting: Some cats will suddenly bite while they are being petted. Petting can unexpectedly become irritating and unpleasant for a cat, as if a switch had been flipped. The cat can show enjoyment for the initial three strokes but will bite or scratch your hand on the fourth one. Recognize when your cat's body language tells you she is done. Most cats will resort to biting as the ultimate signal that you must stop 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 often give several signals before biting.

You should become more aware of your cat's body postures, and stop petting or any other kind of interaction when you see these signs of restlessness:

- A swishing/twitching tail
- 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, stop petting your cat immediately and allow her to sit quietly on your lap or go her own way, whichever she prefers. If you wish her off your lap, go to stand up slowly so she will jump down on her own.

You can try offering treats as you pet your cat in an attempt to increase the amount of time you can pet her. Be careful as you work with her and continue to watch her body language. You can also just accept that this is who your cat is and continue to limit the petting to an amount she can comfortably tolerate.

Petting your cat ONLY on the head is usually best. Avoid the rest of the body.

Fearful/Defensive: Cats are both predators and prey, so their fearful and defensive behaviors aren't always without cause. Cats who are fearful may display body postures such as crouching on the floor, ears back, tail tucked, and possibly rolling slightly to the side. A cat showing these postures should be given space.

Redirected: This type of behavior is directed toward another animal, or person, who didn't initially provoke the behavior. For example, a cat sitting in the window may see an outdoor cat walk across the front yard. Because he can't respond directly to the outdoor cat, and he is becoming more agitated he may instead swat at, or bite the other family cat who is sitting next to him in the window. It can sometimes take a while to recover and become relaxed again so keeping the cats apart until the one cat is calm is best.

Territorial: Cats are highly territorial, 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

- Talk to your veterinarian to rule out any medical reasons for your cat's behavior.
- Learn to read your cat's body language.
- Seek professional help. Working with more serious issues may require 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.

What Not To Do

- Never attempt to handle a fearful or agitated 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 will usually make the problem worse or cause more issues.

Need help? Call our free pet behavior help line at (503) 416-2983.