

Managing Your Kitten's Rough Play

Play-motivated behaviors are common in young, active cats and in cats that live in one-cat households. Cats incorporate a variety of behaviors into their play, such as exploratory, investigative and predatory behaviors. Play provides young cats with opportunities to practice normal cat skills. Kittens like to explore new areas and investigate anything that moves, and may pounce on, bat at, or bite objects that resemble prey.

Kittens learn how to inhibit their bite from their littermates and their mother. A kitten that is separated from her family too early may play more roughly than a kitten that has had more valuable family time. In addition, if humans play with a young kitten using their hands and/or feet instead of toys, the kitten is liable to learn that rough play with people is okay. In most cases, it is possible to teach them how to play appropriately.

Encourage Acceptable Behavior

Redirect your kitten's inappropriate prey behavior onto acceptable objects like toys. Drag a toy along the floor to encourage your kitten to pounce on it, or throw a toy away from your kitten to give her even more exercise while she chases it down. Some kittens will even bring the toy back to be thrown again! Another good toy is one that your kitten can wrestle with, like a soft stuffed toy that's about the size of your kitten, so she can grab it with both front feet, bite it, and kick it with her back feet. This is one of the ways kittens play with each other, especially when they're young. It's also 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. Encourage play with a "wrestling toy" by rubbing it against your kitten's belly when she wants to play roughly - be sure to get your hand out of the way as soon as she accepts the toy.

Since kittens need a lot of playtime, try to set up three or four consistent times during the day to initiate play with your kitten. This will help her understand that she doesn't have to be the one to initiate play by pouncing on you.

Discourage Unacceptable Behavior

- **Withdraw attention when your kitten starts to play too roughly.** The best way to withdraw your attention is to walk to another room and close the door long enough for her to calm down. Do not pick her up to put her in another room, you're rewarding her by touching her and you may even overstimulate her into being rough with you. You should be the one to leave the room.
- **Redirect the behavior.** Before the behavior gets rough, offer her an appropriate outlet – a toy to wrestle with or to chase. This will encourage her to direct her rough play onto a toy instead of a person. We recommend that you keep a stash of toys hidden in each room specifically for this purpose.

Please note: none of these methods will be effective unless you give your kitten acceptable outlets for her energy, by playing with her regularly using appropriate toys or if you aren't consistent. The kitten can't be expected to learn that it's okay to play rough with Dad but not with the baby.

What Not To Do

- Attempts to tap, flick or hit your kitten for rough play are likely to make your kitten afraid of your hands, or she could interpret those flicks as playful moves by you and play even more roughly as a result.
- Picking up your kitten to put her into a "timeout" could reinforce her behavior because she probably enjoys the physical contact of being picked up. By the time you get her to the timeout room and close the door, she has probably forgotten what she did to be put in that situation. Also, she could become rougher when you pick her up.

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