

BITING/SCRATCHING

Does your cat play too rough? Sometimes it can be difficult to distinguish between playfulness and aggression.

What the cat is actually doing is engaging in a type of behavior that is a combination of both — predatory play or “sneak attacks” are expressions of a cat’s instinctive hunting skills at work ... on you! While it can be flattering to know that you have been selected as a playmate, if you are not particularly enjoying all the scratching and biting, you are not alone.

Studies carried out by the University of Pennsylvania and the Animal Medical Center in New York City indicate that a primary trigger for these rough-house antics is routinely leaving the cat alone for extended periods of time with no opportunity for interaction and feedback from a responsive source. People who live with cats and are away from home all day (i.e. at work) must make a concerted effort to redirect the play/aggression to something other than themselves (for example, toys) and when people are not present.

Rolling or dangling toys like mobiles that can be batted about or large stuffed catnip toys that can be wrestled with and “mauled” are excellent substitutes. Select the toys carefully, however, because during rough play, toys can be chewed and torn into bit-sized pieces and bells, squeakers or ornamentation can be pulled off and swallowed.

One of the best methods to encourage play with toys when you are not there is to use the same object in play when you are there. Rub the toy between your palms to impart your scent on it; tie it to a string and drag it or throw it and let the cat chase, stalk or fetch it. Many times when a toy is pleasantly associated with you and the good times you have together, it will also become the focus of attention when you are not present.

Cats that are left alone for extended periods of time can also become over stimulated and excitable during petting. If petting and stroking are met with biting and scratching, keep the session short. Take note as to how long you can pet before the cat begins to bite and scratch and keep the sessions shorter than that. Many cats do not enjoy being scratched and petted on the belly or hips; so if your cat does not like it, don’t do it!

Cats that are introduced into a new household can be quite leery of being touched. When first handling a cat that is new to you, first offer a closed fist. If the cat sniffs and moves in toward you, lightly pet it around the head and shoulders only. Proceed slowly. Short frequent petting sessions are key. Do not reach for or restrain a cat that is not actively soliciting you; the gesture can be perceived as an aggressive move by the cat.

Watch the cat carefully for signs of intolerance or over-stimulation. Stop handling before the cat becomes over stimulated. Should you miss the signs and the cat begins to bite or claw you, a firm “NO!” is in order. Stop petting at once; leave the scene if you have to. Unacceptable behavior should never be rewarded with positive attention.

Finally, never dangle your fingers, scuff your feet or wiggle your toes while engaging in play with your cat. Body parts are not toys; if you permit biting/clawing sometimes but not others, you are giving the cat two messages. By being arbitrary, you are confusing the cat.

Consistency and timing are everything in training. This approach will help to minimize and ultimately correct biting and scratching problems while allowing the cat to develop a healthy relationship with you, the caretaker.