



Rough Play In Kittens

Young, active cats and kittens less than 2 years old commonly display play-motivated aggressive behaviors. Cats incorporate exploratory, investigative and predatory behaviors into their play. Many times these cats live in single-cat households so the only outlet for these behaviors is you!

Normally, a kitten will learn to inhibit biting and scratching from their littermates and their mother – meaning, if the kitten bites or scratches one of them too roughly, the littermate lets out a shrill scream and disengages in the play. A kitten that is separated from its family too early may play more roughly than a kitten that has learned when to stop the rough play from its family.

Kittens readily explore anything that moves, and may swat at, pounce on, or bite objects that resemble prey (i.e. your hands and fingers). This is normal cat behavior. If people play with a kitten using their hands instead of with toys, the kitten will learn that rough play with people (and skin) is okay. You cannot train your cat not to play, but in most cases, it's possible to teach your cat that exceptionally rough play is not acceptable behavior.

Encourage Acceptable Behavior

Redirect your cat's aggressive behavior toward acceptable objects such as toys. A good toy is one that your cat can wrestle with (much like he'd play-wrestle with another cat) – so a stuffed animal about the same size as the kitten works well. He can grab it with both front feet, bite it, and “bunny-kick” it with his rear legs – this is how he'd play with his littermates. Drag the toy along the floor to encourage him to pounce on it, or throw it so he'll chase it (he may even bring it back for a game of fetch).

You want to provide this alternative play target when he starts acting like he's going to bite and scratch your hands. Watch for subtle signs like pinning the ears back, crouching to pounce, and forceful flicking of the tail. Grab the toy and rub it on his belly so he'll grab it (then get your hands out of the way!). The key is to redirect the rough play to the acceptable toy rather than your unacceptable skin.

Try to initiate several play sessions with these toys throughout the day. This will reinforce to him that he doesn't have to pounce and bite you to get you to play with him, that you will readily initiate play sessions on your own.

Discourage Unacceptable Behavior

Your cat should have rules for acceptable behavior (just like a child). Every person that comes in contact with the cat should reinforce these rules. For example, your kitten cannot differentiate between playing rough with an adult versus playing rough with the baby.

Don't set your cat up to fail – what I mean is, don't start playing with him with your hands, and then yell at him when he bites you. The key with training cats is to reward the acceptable behavior (not punish the bad one). If he starts playing rough with your hands or feet, immediately redirect the play to one of his acceptable toys, then praise him when he uses it.

You can also get the message across that play-biting your hand isn't acceptable by completely disengaging all interaction with the cat when he starts doing it. The moment his teeth or claws touch your skin, make a high-pitched loud yelping noise (much like a littermate would that's been bitten too hard), stop all play, and walk away. This will convey the message that rough play with your hands or skin will not be tolerated and he won't be able to interact with you when he does it.

“Time-out” sessions often do not work with cats (they cannot link one behavior with one consequence if the two are separated by more than 1 or 2 seconds). By the time you pick him up and place him in the time-out room and close the door, he's probably already forgotten what he did to be put in that situation in the first place. Plus, it could reinforce the unacceptable behavior because he probably enjoys the physical contact of you picking him up to put him in the time-out room.

NEVER tap, flick, or hit your cat in any way to stop rough play. He may become afraid of your hands or he may interpret it as an invitation to play even rougher with you.

