

Feline Rough Play

All young cats need to play. Play with their own species lets young animals develop their coordination, problem-solving skills and social skills. Feline play consists of mock aggression. Cats stalk, chase, pounce, swat, kick, scratch and bite each other—all in good fun. Unfortunately, problems can arise when play is directed toward people. Despite the cat's playful intentions, he can injure his human playmates.

Is it aggression or rough play?

True aggression is most likely in cats who are frightened or when they react to the sight, sound or scent of another cat outdoors. But if you live with a cat under one year of age and you're his only playmate, it's likely he's playing roughly with you, not being aggressive. It can help to watch his body language. If you see "play face," (mouth half open, almost grinning) or the sideways hop, it's likely play. If your cat growls, hisses or spits, however, it's likely aggression.

Reducing your cat's rough play

- Give your cat new objects to investigate several times a week, like paper bags, cardboard boxes, or even tree limbs.
- Try to play with him daily when he is most active. Direct his play away from you with dangling or feather toys or by throwing balls or even wads of paper.
- Don't encourage your cat to play with your hands or feet. It's cute in kittenhood but painful later on.
- If your cat likes to grab your feet or hide under things and ambush your legs as you walk by, carry toys and toss them to focus him on chasing the toys instead of attacking you.
- Consider adopting another cat as a playmate. If you do, choose a young, playful cat like your current cat.
- Consider building an outdoor enclosure for your cat, complete with branches, boxes, shelves and perches for your cat to navigate. A more complex environment with opportunities to hunt insects and chase leaves means your cat will be less motivated to play with you.
- Consistently give your cat "time-outs" when he plays too roughly. The instant he starts to bite or scratch you, end the game by leaving the room. Don't attempt to pick up your cat and put him in another room for the time-out because this could provoke more bites.
- Never physically punish a cat for rough play. If you hit or slap your cat, he may become even rougher or become fearful of your hands and respond by avoiding you or changing from play to real aggression.



- If your cat insists on directing his rough play at you, you can interrupt his behavior with a quick squirt of water from a spray bottle or a short blast of compressed air (no sound) from a can. You'll need to carry your water bottle or air canister with you when your cat is likely to ambush you so you can deliver the spray the instant he starts to run at you. If you don't have your water bottle or air canister handy, try clapping your hands loudly to startle him. As soon as he stops, throw a toy away from you to redirect his play.