



Teaching children and adults to play with cats

One of the reasons that we have pets is so that we can cuddle and play with them. Such interactions are the source of much joy, but they can sometimes lead to injury to the pet or to the person. Rough play however, can lead to development of behavioral problems. Here are some basic guidelines for appropriate play with cats that can minimize these problems and may also lead people to appreciate the intricacies of feline communication more fully. Kittens, by their second month of life begin to pay more attention to people and use the same behaviors that they use to communicate with each other to try to communicate with humans. Many of these behaviors function to allow closeness and energetic play between cats and may help shape adult social behaviors and communication skills. Kittens remain youngsters until they are socially mature, which occurs at around 2 years of age. Accordingly, they cannot be expected to show the judgment and restraint that an older cat might. All social mammals play, so we are able to recognize signals from kittens that they wish to play and act on these impulses. Children do not exhibit the same form of play as puppies and kittens do, in part, because humans can manipulate objects and each other with their hands. The tendency is for kittens to play with humans exactly as they would play with other kittens and for humans to mimic these kitten behaviors using their hands.

❖ **Claws and Scratching:**

- ❖ Kittens are able to reliably retract their claws after 4 weeks of age
- ❖ Kittens that are hand or bottle-reared tend to play more roughly with their claws and teeth than those who have been naturally weaned by and kept with their mothers.
- ❖ If kittens are allowed to scratch at people, they will often continue this behavior as adults
 - ❖ Kittens/cats should be redirected to an appropriate scratching object
- ❖ Cat scratch disease can be a serious concern for people who have been scratched by cats
 - ❖ It is very important to thoroughly clean any scratches
 - ❖ Consult with your physician if you have any concerns
- ❖ Keeping your cat's nails trimmed should be part of routine maintenance and care of your cat
 - ❖ Nail trimming will help reduce the accidental scratches and snagging of the furniture or carpet
 - ❖ See our "nail trimming tips" document

❖ **Mouthing and Biting:**

- ❖ Kittens use their mouths much as humans use their hands
- ❖ Mouthing and biting are common complaints with young kittens
- ❖ Sometimes this results from inadvertently playing too rough with your kitten
- ❖ Kittens should be discouraged from mouthing or biting
 - ❖ It is much easier to stop this behavior when it first starts, than it is to try and correct a long standing problem.
 - ❖ The first thing you should do when your kitten mouths you is to say "no", stop, and gently remove your body part while holding the kitten
 - ❖ If you pull your hand away from the kitten, even if doing so to avoid a prick, you are inadvertently encouraging the unwanted play
 - ❖ Kittens/cats should be redirected to an appropriate playing object
- ❖ Cats' teeth are curved, small, and sharp providing the ideal environment for bacterial infection with a bite
 - ❖ It is very important to wash any bites or scratches thoroughly
 - ❖ Consult your physician if you have any concerns

❖ **Boxing, Mounting, Rearing, and Pouncing:**

- ❖ Boxing, mounting, rearing and pouncing are normal kitten behaviors
 - ❖ These behaviors function to allow closeness and energetic play between animals and may serve to help shape adult social behaviors and communication skills
- ❖ When cats are small and light in weight, these wrestling and boxing behaviors tend to be harmless
 - ❖ As the animal grows the pouncing and boxing can injure or scare a child

❖ **Behavior modification:**

- ❖ We need to protect both people and our pets from tragic events/injuries
- ❖ Human guidance must be provided because it is impossible to know whether a cat understands how fragile infants, young children, or aged, frail humans can be
- ❖ Kittens are energetic and very focused and will exhaust the average person almost instantly
- ❖ You are responsible for shaping the cat's behavior with positive kitten attention
 - ❖ If they are not able to get attention through positive means, they will get it through ones we consider negative
 - ❖ Young kittens are just like young children—if the only interaction they get is negative, they will learn to crave that negative interaction and, like children, they will intensify the negative behaviors to get ever-increasing amounts of response
- ❖ You must be vigilant and, if you are not able to do so, should consider placing the animal in a safe area (its own room, a crate, or a pen) until you feel that you have the energy again to face the onslaught of play
- ❖ You should also refrain from exhibiting what may be perceived to be human versions of feline correctional behaviors.
- ❖ These include hanging the kitten by its scruff, rolling it over, forcefully placing it on its back, or shaking the cat by its scruff or neck.
- ❖ First, these behaviors are not mimics of behavior that adult cats exhibit toward kittens.
- ❖ Second, even to the extent that these behaviors do overlap with corrections of cat behaviors, there is a real danger in overdoing them and causing the pet injury
- ❖ This is particular true with kittens
- ❖ Cats are tiny and, although adult cats frequently bite at or carry young cats by the nape of the neck, cats have pressure sensors under their teeth and can use just the right amount of control—people do not have this ability.
- ❖ Finally, these forceful kinds of correctional behaviors exhibited by people toward their pets may encourage physical solutions for problems that are better solved by an intellectual solution
- ❖ We should not have to manhandle a cat to convince the animal to alter its behavior—we should be smart enough to redirect that behavior in ways that can be mutually satisfying. The best emotional relationships with pets are founded on that basis and are devoid of fear and injury
- ❖ Cats and kittens DO NOT respond to force and reprimands only work if you catch your cat “in the act”
 - ❖ Must be within a few seconds of “the act” or it won't stop him/her from doing it again and may even cause your cat to be afraid of you or the surroundings
 - ❖ Being afraid may even cause him or her to try to defend himself
 - ❖ If you do catch you cat making a mistake, it is better for both of you to create a distraction by making a loud noise or throwing something that will attract its attention, but not be associated with you
 - ❖ If the cat associates the distraction as coming from you, they'll just learn to do it when you're not around
 - ❖ Cats respond to praise when an appropriate behavior is exhibited and distraction when they make a “mistake”
 - ❖ As soon as the cat is distracted, you can initiate appropriate play (e.g., introduce a feather on a string for the cat that lurks around corners and chases shoelaces or fingers) or take him or her to a location where the behavior is “ok” and praise them for doing it there
- ❖ Clients who adopt kittens must be realistic and learn to read their kittens' signals well:
 - ❖ No rough play should be tolerated
 - ❖ Toys should always be substituted for swatting at people
 - ❖ Corrections should include distractions (loud noises) followed by a substitution with an appropriate toy and, if the cat pursues aggressive acts
 - ❖ Unceremoniously dumped from the your lap
 - ❖ Just stand and let it fall off—do not dangle any body parts in front of an aggressive cat) and ignore it until it has calmed down
 - ❖ Once the cat has become calm, play can be reintroduced with a toy.
 - ❖ It is important to not encourage the direction of the predatory or aggressive behavior towards humans

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