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## Rough Play and Cats

### **Why does my cat's play sometimes become rough?**

Cats use play to practice skills they would normally need to hunt and survive in the wild. Any moving object stimulates components of play, like stalking, pouncing, swatting and biting. Cats usually learn to inhibit rough play from their mother cat and littermates. If the cat were removed from the litter too early, then the cat would not have learned the appropriate play tactics.

Play aggression is commonly seen in young cats (usually 2 years or younger) and in one-cat households. Typically these cats are very active and do not have enough proper outlets for their energy. Under stimulation and a lack of appropriate opportunities for play may be expressed through bursts of aggressive play, which can inadvertently lead to injuries to people.

### **What can I do to help prevent rough play?**

Encourage appropriate play by scheduling interactive play sessions every day. During this time, actively engage your cat to play with toys. Encourage play by rolling a ball or dragging a toy on a string through the house for the cat to chase or dangling a feather wand for the cat to jump at. You should also provide the cat with a stuffed toy that it can "kill". Encourage the cat to play with the stuffed toy by rubbing the toy on his belly so he can grab it with his front feet and kick it with his back feet. Always play with a toy and **never** encourage your cat to play with your hands or feet.

Provide several different types of toys for the cat to play with (see our handout Cat Toys). To keep the toys fresh and exciting rotate them every few days. In other words, leave 3 or 4 toys out for the cat to play with for a few days then put those toys up and bring out 3 or 4 different toys. Hide toys and treats around the house for the cat to explore and find when you are not there.

Allowing the cat access to a window so he can watch outdoor activity may be helpful to provide stimulation for some cats. NHS recommends that cats are not allowed outside without human supervision.

Cats can also be trained to do a number of tricks. This is an excellent way to stimulate your cat's mind, interact with your cat in a positive way and to gain some verbal control over your cat. Using a few choice food tidbits as rewards, most cats can be taught to sit, come, fetch, or "give 5".

Adding another cat for a playmate may be beneficial especially for a cat with a strong desire for social play. For this to work both cats must have similar energy levels and social needs.

### **How can I tell if play is about to become aggressive?**

Often it is possible to see a change in your kitten's behavior that will signal to you that the play session is getting out of control. The first sign may be intense movement of the tail from side to side. The ears may go back and the pupils, the dark part of the eye may become larger. At this point it is best to end the play session before the kitten becomes too agitated.

### **What should I do if the cat begins to exhibit play aggression?**

Use an aversive to interrupt the aggressive behavior. For an aversive to be effective, it must occur while the behavior is taking place and be timed correctly. Noise deterrents are often effective in cats. For very young kittens, a "hissing" noise may deter aggressive play behavior. Examples of other aversives include; a squirt of water from a water bottle, a pop can with pennies inside or a burst of air from a can of compressed air. What is most important in using an aversive is the timing. You must have the aversive with you so that you can immediately interrupt the behavior.

After you interrupt the aggressive behavior, give the cat an appropriate toy to play with. You may want to keep a stash of toys available in every room. This will help teach her to play with the toy and not human hands or feet. If the cat continues to play rough with you, end the interaction by walking away, out of the room if necessary. This will teach him that he gets nothing from playing to rough. Leave him alone long enough for him to calm down. Don't pick him up and move him to another area. He may view your handling as attention. Remember that in addition to these techniques, you must also provide appropriate outlets for your cat's energy.

Physical punishment must be avoided! First, pain can cause aggression so if you hit your cat, you may increase the aggressive behavior. Second, painful punishment may cause fear and owner avoidance. Third, owners that attempt to correct the playful aggression with physical contact may actually serve to reward the behavior

### **What should I do about my cat that hides, stalks or jumps out at family members and me?**

Another component of aggressive play behavior is hiding and dashing out and attacking people as they walk by. Often the kitten or cat waits around corners or under furniture until someone approaches. This can be a difficult problem.

First, keep a journal of occurrences, time of day and location. This can help identify a pattern that can be avoided. Second, you need to be able to know where your cat is. An approved cat collar (one that has a quick release catch or is elastic) with a large bell on it is helpful. If the cat always attacks from the same location, you can be ready, anticipate the attack and become pre-emptive. As you prepare to walk by the area, toss a small toy to divert the cat to an appropriate play object. Another tactic is to use your noise deterrent to get the cat out of the area or block access to the location such as under the bed so that the cat is unable to hide there and pounce out at your feet.