



Ouch!!! How to stop cat aggression toward people.

This is a collection of wonderful ideas from the members and moderators of TheCatSite.com. These are methods we have found to be very helpful in stopping aggression.

We advise that you read one (or both) of the following books by Pam Johnson Bennett: Psycho Kitty and Twisted Whiskers. These books have wonderful information about all kinds of behavior problems and are written by an expert on cat behavior.

Many members have found that Bach's Rescue Remedy or some of the other flower essences work wonders in calming agitated cats. This <http://www.petsynergy.com/flower.html> is a good web site for information about these herbal treatments.

The first step in reducing aggression is determining the type of aggression your cat is engaging in.

Cat aggression can be broken into five types:

- Aggression as a result of fear
- Pain or illness induced aggression
- Aggression due to overstimulation (petting)
- Play aggression
- Redirected aggression

Aggression Due To Fear, Pain, or Illness

Whenever you see a sudden change in your cat's behavior you need to determine the cause of this change. When cats are sick or in pain, they will often scratch or bite humans and other animals they come in contact with. Please take any cat who has only recently become aggressive to your vet to be checked for illness or injury.

A frightened cat will have a fear response that is triggered by the brain. The frightened cat becomes aggressive NOT in an attempt to hurt you. Instead, she is protecting herself. This is an automatic reaction to fear and it is not at all deliberate. Simply remove whatever is frightening the cat, give the cat some time to calm down, and everything should return to normal.

Aggression Due To Overstimulation While Petting

You're petting your cat and suddenly he grabs you with his claws and teeth. Not a full-powered attack, but you've still got those sharp tips around your hand. What to do? In the short run, freeze. Don't fight your cat or you may trigger a real bite. Sometimes smacking your other hand hard against a hard surface - a table top, for example - may startle your cat into breaking off. If you stay still, however, he usually calms down and releases you. If you would like to increase the time you can pet without being bitten, try the following technique:

First: Get a clock or watch with a second hand. Sit down and pet your cat watching to see how long you can pet without being bitten. Once you have done this a few times, you will have a good idea what her limit is.

While you are doing this, become familiar with your cat and his body language. Cat lovers often think such attacks come without warning, but the fact is that they missed the warning signs of a cat who has simply had enough. For most cats, the tail is the key: If your cat starts twitching his tail in a jerky fashion, time to call off the petting has arrived. Some cats have different signals. Pay close attention to find out how your cat signals that an attack is about to come.

Now that you know how long he can tolerate being petted and you know what his warning signals are, you are ready for the next step.

Second: Lets say he let you pet him for 2 minutes. What you do now is (using your watch to time things) pet him for only 1.5 minutes and then stop even though he is still purring and happy. Do this every time he gets in your lap for several days. (Of course, if he can tolerate 4 minutes, you would stop at 3.5 minutes of petting, etc). Just make sure that you keep an eye out for signals that he has become overstimulated. Always stop the instant you see the overstimulation signal!

Third: After a couple of days of successful petting, you can begin to GRADUALLY add time. Each day, add about 20 - 30 seconds to your petting until he can sit with you and not bite. If he ever does bite, go back to the previous length of successful petting and stay there for a couple more days before adding more time. Again, make sure that you always keep an eye out for signals of overstimulation. Always stop the instant you see the overstimulation signal.

This is a bit tedious (especially having to watch the clock), but it really does work!

Warning: Often these "I've had enough" attacks come if you've been petting your cat's belly. This is a very sensitive area for cats, and even if yours offers it to you, you're better off petting somewhere else. One reason is sexual in nature: Your male cat becomes aroused when his belly is rubbed, and reacts with a bite because that's what feline mating behavior involves.

Play Aggression

Sure, it hurts all the same, but the cat who pounces on your feet/hands and then careens off the wall isn't trying to hurt you - he's playing. You need to increase your play sessions with your cat with an appropriate toy, such as a cat fishing pole or toy on a string - not one of your body parts - to help your cat burn off his excess energy before you try for a quiet pet session.

Never reinforce her for biting....if she bites, immediately stop paying attention to her. Blow a strong puff of air in her face or clap your hands real loud and shout "NO"! Don't try to pull your hands or feet away from her when she is biting because she will think you are playing with her. Just hold still, do the puff or clap and then pry her paws off. It shouldn't take too long for your little one to learn that this is a no-no. (Never play with your kitten with your hands or feet...only play with toys so she never learns that it is okay to attack people.)

For more serious play aggression try the following:

1. Once the cat attacks, stand perfectly still. Don't try to pull away the hand (or other body part) that she is biting. If you try to pull away, this will trigger the "prey" cues in her brain and she will attack even harder. So, stay still and use your free hand to pull her off.
2. Immediately after an attack, put her in a quiet room (the bathroom) for no more than five minutes. This will give her time to settle down and for attack mode to turn off.
3. Pay careful attention to her behavior. Learn what her pre-attack behaviors are. All cats do something right before attacking, like twitching their tails or their eyes dilate. Each cat has its own unique signals, so you will have to learn your own cat's signals.
4. Once you have learned her pre-attack signals, IMMEDIATELY upon seeing a signal and BEFORE the attack occurs, do one of the following:
 - toss a small toy in front of her. Toss the toy at an angle across her field of vision but at an angle so that it is going away from her...like the way a mouse would run...toward a wall away from the cat. Cat's brains don't perceive vertical movement very well, so it needs to be tossed across the floor.
 - or use another toy to distract her (never play with her with your hands or feet...always use a toy)
 - or Shout NO!

The main idea is to keep the attack from happening. It won't take too long before she realizes that she can no longer do this.

Redirected Aggression

Redirected aggression is typically a result of your cat seeing or smelling an outside cat. Your cat has an automatic territorial response. However, because your cat cannot attack the intruder, and because his brain says "Attack Now!" the cat launches into the closest moving target he sees. This target might be you or it might be his companion cat or dog. The thing to keep in mind is that the attacker isn't trying to hurt you. It is simply that his brain has triggered an attack response and his body follows the direction given by the brain. To end these attacks, set up his environment so that he no longer sees or smells the outdoor cats.

For the Rare Cat Whose Attacks are Unprovoked and Extremely Violent

This section will apply to only a very few readers. Most cat aggressive acts are scary and they hurt, but they are not bad enough to send you to the hospital. With most cats, we can (with some investigation) easily see what is causing the aggression to occur (as listed above). However, there are a few cats who launch into wildly dangerous attacks that seem to be unprovoked. These cats need to be handled with care, but with a lot of patience and persistence their behavior can be modified.

The most important thing to do with one of these violent cats is to take the cat to the vet to be examined. Chances are that the cat is ill or injured and is violent as a result.

If the cat is healthy, try to follow the suggestions below.

Invest in a Feliway Comfort Zone plug-in for your room. This is a tad expensive, but it does wonders in calming agitated cats.

Start carrying a pocket full of little furry mice or balls and when your cat looks like she is about to attack, toss a ball or mouse across her field of vision (slightly away as if the mouse is trying to escape) so that the cat can direct her attack on the toy instead of on you. Then, do not give any attention, simply walk away. When you see or hear her coming, swing around to her direction and toss the toy to her to distract her. Also, every time she bites or attacks from behind, scream once a real loud piercing scream like she is killing you. That will startle her out of the behavior.

If there is a towel or long pillow or robe (or something long like this) nearby hold it (the towel or whatever) like a curtain between the cat and your legs. Then use the towel to herd the cat out of the room. Do this very slowly and silently and use the towel (still hanging like a curtain) to gently nudge the cat out of the room. Make sure that the towel always keeps the cat from seeing your feet so that the cat does not try to attack under this barrier. Close the door as soon as the cat is out of the room.

While you are beginning this training process, DO NOT use a squirt bottle and whatever you do, DO NOT hit him. Aggression frightens the cat. A frightened cat is hard-wired to attack the predator. When you are "harming" him with water or a smack, you are a predator. He will fight you to ensure that you don't hurt him again.

Also, during the training process, if the cat launches at you from across the room- you freeze. Do not move, just stay still. Take an old cloth that you don't care much about and strip it out into fine strips, about an inch wide and long enough to go around your ankles and tie. Take some Vicks Vapo Rub or mentholatum and smear that on this cloth, and tie it around your ankles before you go out into his territory. I guarantee you will only have to wear this style of ankle bracelet for a few times. It stops them in their tracks.

Now, you are ready to begin!

1. The most important step in the behavior modification process is to learn her pre-attack signals. All cats will do some specific behavior right before an attack. Some cats twitch their tails quickly, some lay back or perk forward their ears, some make a little growl, and almost all will dilate their eyes just before an attack. Watch carefully to see what your cat does before an attack. If she attacks when you are sleeping I

strongly encourage you to keep her out of your room (or in the cage) at night.

2. Now that you know what she does immediately before an attack, you will have to keep a careful eye on her whenever she is around. The very instant you see her do her pre-attack behavior IMMEDIATELY grab her by the scruff of the neck (she can't attack if you have her firmly by the scruff) and then put your other hand under her back legs. Carry her with all of her weight on your hand under her legs -- Although you still have one hand holding the scruff, all weight should be on her back legs. Scruffing merely acts to prevent an attack -- it should not be how you hold the cat. Now GENTLY toss her in the bathroom. (PLEASE just drop her into the bathroom far enough away from the door that she does not immediately run back out and attack -- don't throw her in. The only reason for the GENTLE toss is so you can shut the door before she gets out and attacks)

3. Leave her in the bathroom for no longer than five minutes...just long enough to get out of attack mode.

4. Finally, keep a very careful eye out to see what kind of things are going on around her when she attacks. It could be that she does this every time a cat walks outside the window. Or, it could be in response to a noisy car or motorcycle going by. Or..it may even be something like the heater turning on or some other sound that bothers her. If you can figure out what triggers the attacks, then you can change things so that she is no longer bothered by whatever is bothering her.

5. Talk to your vet about putting your cat on Prozac or St. John's Wort. Do not use Valium as it may make her more aggressive and will cause her to be drunk and woozy. The St. John's Wort is best (if you can find the liquid) because it has no uncomfortable side effects (Prozac usually causes a queezy tummy and general yucky feelings for a few weeks, though these side effects typically go away fairly quickly). Note that it may take up to three weeks before these medications kick in AND note that you MUST give the medication to her EVERY DAY.

But....don't stop with the medication. You also need to modify her behavior -- that is, you need to help her learn that attacking is not acceptable.

This will take a lot of patience and persistence. We wish you much luck!