

Kitten Behavior: Problems and Solutions

Biting and Scratching

Play aggression is normal and can be recognized by the kitten's body posture. The tail lashes back and forth, the ears are flattened to the head and pupils (black part of the eye) are often dilated or large just before the kitten pounces or attacks.

- If your kitten is becoming overly aggressive and biting or scratching you, **it is important to stop this behavior as soon as possible**. A nip or scratch from an 8-week-old kitten may seem cute, but the same behavior from an adult cat can be very painful.
- **Never use your hands or feet as playthings for your kitten to bite on**. All toys should be a distance from your hands so the kitten has no opportunity to bite or scratch you even by accident. Balls or stuffed mice to throw and toys or feathers on a string can be good choices.
- **Play with your kitten at least 10-15 minutes twice a day or more**. Cats are often most active in the early morning and early evening. Exercise and vigorous playing can help get rid of excess energy and keep your kitten calmer for the remainder of the day.
- **Never use physical punishment on a cat**. Cats do not link the punishment with their bad behavior and they will only become fearful of you and other humans. Squirt bottles with water or noise deterrents like a hiss sound or an air canister can be very effective but only if used within the first few seconds of the unwanted behavior to startle the cat and not scare it badly.
- If your kitten bites or scratches you during play, say "Ouch" loudly, stop playing and walk away. **Stopping play immediately is the most effective way to convince your kitten that his behavior is not acceptable**. After a minute or two, call the kitten and resume playing. Give lots of treats when the kitten is playing nicely. Continue to reward good behavior and stop the play whenever the kitten is too rough.
- If your kitten jumps out and play attacks with you frequently, put a bell on his collar so you can hear him coming and try to deter the attack with a squirt of water or air. You may have to confine or deny your kitten access to certain places for a while if he always launches attacks from a specific place.

(Over)

Scratching Furniture

Scratching is a normal cat behavior used primarily to mark territory rather than just to sharpen claws, although keeping the claws trimmed is still important. What we want to do is **control *what* the cat scratches on rather than try to eliminate the behavior entirely.**

- **Figure out what your cat likes to scratch on and try to provide him with something similar that is OK to scratch.** Does the cat like vertical or horizontal surfaces? Carpet or fabric? Place a scratching post near the areas the kitten is currently scratching; you may need more than one at first and you can try different types until successful.
- Make the scratching post fun. Put toys or treats or catnip on it. Scratch at it yourself and if the kitten copies you, reward him with a treat.
- Booby-trap the items you do not want the cat to scratch. Double-sided sticky tape is very effective on furniture and drapes. You can drape a net and balance a few aluminum cans on top of chairs or couches so that when the kitten scratches, the cans fall down and startles him. **Using a squirt gun or air canister to startle the cat does NOT work because the kitten just learns to scratch when you are not around.**
- If all else fails, there are temporary plastic caps that be glued onto the cat's nail tips to stop the claws from causing damage. Permanent surgical removal of the claws is NOT recommended, as it can be a very painful procedure and removes part of the cat's natural defense mechanisms.

Houseplant Chewing

Many cats enjoy chewing and eating greenery. There are grasses you can buy that are OK for your cat to eat if you want to provide them; however, many houseplants are poisonous to cats so it is important to stop this behavior. A brief list of some of the more toxic plants includes:

Caladium	Lilies (Lilium spp)
Dumb Cane (Dieffenbachia spp)	English Ivy (Hedera spp)
Mistletoe	Oleander (Nerium oleander)
Philodendron	

*(See our handout **Common Poisonous Plants** for more information)*

To stop a cat from chewing on your houseplants:

- Remove all plants but one; making sure it is not a toxic variety.
- Brush chili sauce on the underside of the leaves or spray with water and sprinkle cayenne pepper on the leaves. Then spray with a diluted solution of perfume (1 part perfume to 25 parts water).
- Let the cat nibble on this plant and he will quickly learn to avoid it.
- Move this plant around to different locations for the next week, renewing the pepper and perfume if needed. Then bring in the rest of the plants and spray them with diluted perfume. Your kitten will have hopefully figured out that all these plants taste/smell bad and will stop eating them.