

(39) AGGRESSION: DIAGNOSING AND TREATING

Aggression is a serious and dangerous behavior problem for cat owners. There are many different types of aggression. Making a diagnosis, determining the prognosis (the chances of safe and effective correction) and developing an appropriate treatment plan are usually best handled with a veterinary behaviorist. In some cases medical conditions can contribute to aggression. Before a behavior consultation your cat must have a thorough physical examination and blood tests to rule out organ dysfunction. To treat aggression, it is necessary to determine which type of aggression your cat displays; fear, territorial, parental, play, redirected, predatory, petting-induced, pain-induced, social status, medical or learned. Also determine in what circumstances the pet is aggressive and whether the aggression is toward family members, strangers, other pets in the household, or strange pets. Keeping a diary can be particularly useful. More than one form of aggression may be exhibited. Behavior modification techniques and/or changes to the pet's environment will be necessary to correct most aggressive problems. Drug therapy can be a useful part of treatment for some forms of aggression.

Fear aggression: what is it and how is it diagnosed?

Fear aggression arises when a cat is exposed to people, other animals, places or stimuli (e.g. noises) that the cat is unfamiliar with, or to situations previously associated with an unpleasant experience. Although many cats may retreat when fearful, those that are on their own territory or are prevented from retreating because they are cornered, are more likely to fight. If the stimulus (person or animal) retreats or the pet is harmed or further frightened in any way (e.g. a fight, punishment), the fear is likely to be further aggravated. In addition people or animals that do not approach in a calm, confident or friendly manner are more likely to be met with a fearful response. Fear aggression toward family members might arise out of punishment or other unpleasant experience associated with them. Many cases of fear aggression are seen as combinations or complicating factors of other forms of aggression (territorial, maternal, redirected, etc.). Fearful body postures in conjunction with aggression are diagnostic of fear aggression. Behavior therapy perhaps in combination with drug therapy can be used to treat most cases of fear aggression. (See our handout #44: Fear of people, animals and places).

Play aggression: what is it and how is it diagnosed?

Play aggression is commonly shown by young cats toward people or other pets in the family. Overly rambunctious play along with grabbing, stalking, pouncing, nipping or biting of people or their clothing are common signs of play aggression. Although it is a normal behavior it can lead to injuries. If handled incorrectly it could lead to more serious forms of aggression as your cat matures. Play aggression is covered in a separate handout (#40).

Territorial aggression: what is it and how can it be treated?

Territorial aggression can be exhibited toward people or other animals (usually other cats) that approach or reside on the pet's property. Territorial aggression can occur towards cats outside of the home, but also towards cats that live in the household. This may be with the addition of another cat, or when resident cats reach social maturity at 1-2 years of age. Since the person or other animal entering the property may also be causing fear or anxiety, territorial aggression often occurs in conjunction with fear aggression. Treatment is covered in a separate handout on territorial aggression (#42).

Predatory aggression: what is it and how can it be treated?

Predation is the instinctive desire to chase and hunt prey. Predatory behaviors include stalking, chasing, attacking, and ingestion of prey animals, but may occasionally be directed at people or other pets. Although the desire to chase can be reduced by using desensitizing and counter-conditioning in the presence of the stimuli (see our handout #6: Behavior modification), this is a very dangerous form of aggression, which must be prevented. If the behavior is directed toward small pets in the home, confining those pets to a room where the cat does not have access is best. If the behavior is directed to animals outside, then keeping the cat indoors is a solution. Predatory aggression may be part of play aggression in young cats.

Pain-induced aggression: what is it and how can it be treated?

Pain-induced aggression is usually elicited by handling or contact that elicits pain or discomfort. However, even if your cat is not exhibiting pain, certain medical conditions (endocrine imbalances, organ disease, etc.) may make the pet more irritable and prone to aggression. Fear and anxiety further compound many of these cases. Once your cat learns that aggression is successful at removing the stimulus, aggression may recur when similar situations arise in the future, whether or not the pain is still present. Treatment requires first that the medical or painful condition be resolved. Next, identify the types of handling and situations that have led to aggression in the past. With desensitization and counter-conditioning (handout #6), your cat can slowly and gradually be accustomed to accept and enjoy these situations. Once the cat learns that there is no further discomfort associated with the handling, and that there may be rewards, the problem should resolve.

Maternal aggression: what is it and how can it be treated?

Maternal aggression is directed toward people or other animals that approach the queen with her kittens. With desensitization, counterconditioning, good control and highly motivating rewards, it may be possible to train your cat to accept handling of the kittens. Once the kittens are weaned, spaying should be considered to prevent recurrence.

Redirected aggression: what is it and how can it be treated?

Aggression that is directed toward a person or pet that did not initially evoke the aggression is classified as redirected. This is likely to occur when the cat is aroused and a person or other pet intervenes or approaches. Cats that are highly aroused must be avoided. Since redirected aggression arises out of other forms of aggression, it is important to identify and treat the initial cause of aggression (e.g. fear, territorial, other animals outside), or to prevent the problem by avoiding exposure. See our handout #41: Redirected Aggression.

Petting induced aggression: what is it and how can it be treated?

Some cats bite while being petted. Some cats are intolerant of all handling, but most cats with petting aggression accept a certain amount of petting but then become highly agitated and attack when they have had enough. This can be difficult to understand since many of these cats seek attention and at the outset seem to enjoy physical contact from the owner. It seems that these cats have a certain threshold for the amount of physical interaction that they can tolerate. Although the aggression may be a specific form that arises from arousal related to petting, fear and social status may also play a role. First, identify and avoid responses that might increase your cat's fear or anxiety (e.g. punishment, uninvited approaches and handling) and make all handling experiences positive. When handling, physical restraint must be avoided as cats that are placed in a position where they feel constrained or unable to escape might become aggressive. The cat that assumes a leadership role in relationship to a family member may bite or attack that person, while avoiding aggression to a person who is more "dominant" in the relationship. (For diagnosis and treatment of social status aggression see below).

In order to resolve petting induced aggression, make sure that the initiation and termination of petting is under your control. In addition your cat needs to learn that petting is not associated with excessive restraint or anything unpleasant but rather with rewards. Do not approach, confront, or lift your cat, unless it approaches for affection. At this point call the cat onto your lap (perhaps with a command, or bell), and begin light stroking without any physical restraint. After a brief session put the cat on the floor and give a reward such as food, play, or a catnip toy. At each subsequent session, when the cat is ready for affection, call the cat onto your lap, and pat or stroke a little longer before putting the cat down and providing the reward. Be aware that as you approach the limit of your cat's tolerance of petting, anxiety and aggression will recur. This limit can often be evidenced by a change in the cat's demeanour. Usually the cat will begin to rapidly move the tail back and forth, the pupils may dilate and the ears go back, or the cat may begin to lick or act agitated. Try and stay below this threshold and cease petting before the cat becomes anxious. Although shaping may greatly increase the number and length of petting sessions your cat will accept and enjoy, you will need to learn and accept your cat's limitations.

Social status aggression: what is it and how is it treated?

Information on the social structure and relationship between cats is continually being updated with new research. Cats do maintain social relationships when living in groups leading to the speculation that some form of social structure also exists. Social structures are often maintained with aggressive displays and actions. Some cats may display aggression toward their owners or other cats when displaying assertiveness. This type of aggression is infrequently described in the veterinary literature but is a consideration in those cats that bite or attack their owners or other cats in order to control a situation. Since cats are now known to be a social species, it is not surprising that some cats will assert their authority or leadership, when challenged by a subordinate cat or family member in the home. Social status aggression in most cases is a complicating factor of other forms of aggression. Assertive displays, soliciting attention through attacks or biting, aggression during petting, attempts to control the environment by blocking access to doorways or refusing to be moved from sleeping areas, stalking family members, and threats or aggression to owners when walking or passing by the cat, may be displays of social status. A diagnosis of social status aggression is also a strong consideration when the cat attacks family members that have not assumed a position of control and leadership but does not threaten those that have good control.

Attaining leadership over assertive cats must be accomplished without physical force and confrontation, as this would lead to fear and retaliation. Take control of all rewards, and teach the cat that obedient and compliant behavior is the only way to earn them. By teaching a cat that each play session, treat, or piece of food must be earned from its “owners”, the cat will learn that the owner is in control of all resources and all that is positive. Conversely, the cat must learn that its demands or attempts to control resources (attention getting behavior, play or food soliciting behavior) must never be rewarded. An observant owner should be able to determine when a cat is ready and desiring food, treats, affection or play. This is usually a cat that looks relaxed, tail up and pupils normal size. Using a command or audible signal such as a bell, the cat can be trained to come to the owner and receive these rewards. Once the cat learns to come or approach on command or signal, the desired behavior (e.g. petting) can then be shaped by gradually making the task more difficult at each training session. (See petting aggression above for details). Demanding, assertive, or any other forms of undesirable behavior should never be physically punished. Inattention or walking out of the room often works best, but if this is not possible an immediate disruption with a can of compressed air, water pistol, or air horn, should quickly deter the behavior without causing fear of the owner. Another way to ensure immediate control without the need for direct contact is to fit your cat with a harness, and attach a long leash when you are at home and supervising.

Learned aggression: what is it and how can it be treated?

Learning is an important component of most types of aggression. Whenever a cat learns that aggression is successful at removing the stimulus, the behavior is further reinforced. Some forms of aggression are inadvertently rewarded by owners who, in an attempt to calm the pet and reduce aggression, actually encourage the behavior with patting or verbal reassurances. Pets that are threatened or punished for aggressive displays may become even more aggressive each time the situation recurs.

Treatment with flooding is intended to teach the pet that the stimulus is not associated with any harm and that aggression will not successfully remove the stimulus. With desensitization and counter-conditioning, the cat is not only taught that the stimulus is safe, but that it is associated with a reward. (See handout #6 on Behavior Modification: desensitization and counter-conditioning).

What are some of the other causes of aggression?

Aggression associated with medical disorders may arise at any age, may have a relatively sudden onset and may not fit any feline species typical behavior. Some medical conditions can, on their own, cause aggression, but in many cases a combination of behavioral factors and medical problems cause the pet to pass a certain threshold at which aggression is displayed. Infectious agents such as rabies, hormonal imbalances such as hyperthyroidism, psychomotor epilepsy, neoplasia, and a variety of genetic and metabolic disorders can cause or predispose a cat to aggression. Painful conditions such as dental disease, or arthritis, and medical conditions causing fever, fatigue or sensory loss might increase the pet’s irritability.

In rare circumstances, aggression has no identifiable etiology (idiopathic) and no particular stimuli that initiate the aggressive displays. There may be a genetic propensity to aggression.