



Cat Behaviour Guide

Aggressive Behaviour in Cats



Aggression is a common but often misunderstood behaviour in cats. This guide offers an overview of a few emotional motivations behind aggressive behaviour, which can help you improve your relationship with your feline friend, reduce stress and create a safer, more harmonious home.

What is aggression?

Aggression is behaviour that harms or threatens another individual, with the purpose of making a threat go away. It is a normal form of communication for every animal, including cats, and can be motivated by various emotions and situations. A cat displaying aggressive behaviour is not being “bad” or “mean”, they are expressing their feelings in a way that makes sense to them.

Several factors influence a cat’s aggression, including genetics, early experiences, emotional and physical health, and their environment. Positive socialization for kittens, along with enrichment and protection from fear-inducing situations, can help prevent aggressive behaviour.

Important: Describing a cat as “aggressive” is inaccurate. Aggression refers to a wide range of behaviours, many of which are normal responses to specific situations.

What does aggression look like?

Cats communicate through facial expressions, body posture and sound. By understanding their body language, you can identify signs of aggression and prevent escalating situations, leading to safer interactions and happier cats.

Tip: Staring or prolonged eye contact is seen as rude by cats. If a cat avoids eye contact or looks away, it often means, “I’m not interested; please go away.”

Aggressive behaviour can be categorized into two main types based on the cat’s body language: offensive and defensive. Some signs may fit both categories or appear when a cat is relaxed or playing. It’s important to consider the entire cat and the context to accurately interpret their feelings.

Offensive Behaviours	Defensive Behaviours	Common Behaviours
Eyes: Squinting/narrowed, small pupils, direct eye contact	Eyes: Wide/round, large pupils, avoiding eye contact	Eyes: Staring
Ears: Straight forward	Ears: Turned sideways	Ears: Pinned back
Whiskers: Forward, stiff	Whiskers: Pulled back	
Tail: Thrashing, stiff	Tail: Tucked under body or between legs	Tail: Straight up, twitching, thumping, or upside down ‘L’ shape



Posture: Standing tall, moving forward, trying to appear larger	Posture: Crouching, leaning away, trying to appear smaller	Posture: Fur standing up, freezing, swatting, or biting
Sounds: Hissing, spitting	Sounds: Growling, yowling	

Important: “Offensive” and “defensive” categorize cat body language, but aggression can stem from various emotions. A cat experiencing fear might display either type of body language, depending on their past experiences and the current situation. Understanding these nuances helps you better interpret your cat’s behaviour.

Why does my cat show aggression?

Cats can experience a variety of emotions, sometimes at the same time, which can influence the motivations for their actions. Understanding your cat’s emotions in different situations can help you manage their triggers, reduce stress and foster a more harmonious relationship.

Fear-Induced Aggression:

Fear-induced aggression happens when a cat feels threatened, especially if they can’t escape. Any experience a cat considers frightening can trigger this response. Cats may associate people, places or situations with perceived threats, reacting with aggression even when there’s no obvious danger from our point of view. Every cat is unique, so pay close attention to what your cat finds scary.

Pain-Induced Aggression:

Cats may react aggressively when they experience or anticipate pain, often as a way to protect themselves. Issues like arthritis or dental disease can cause significant discomfort, but cats tend to hide their pain, so it may go unnoticed. This can lead to confusion when a cat suddenly swats or bites after being touched in a sore spot. If your cat becomes aggressive when touched in areas they previously enjoyed, consider a vet check-up.

Stress-Induced Aggression:

Stress-induced aggression can seem unpredictable, often triggered by changes in health, routine, environment or a lack of enrichment. Maintaining a stable routine, providing regular play and mental stimulation, and scheduling routine vet visits can help reduce stress and improve your cat’s well-being.

Frustration-Induced Aggression:

Cats can become frustrated when they can't achieve a desired result, often due to a lack of communication skills, being ignored or feeling trapped in an unwanted situation. Cats may seek attention by bringing toys, meowing or rubbing against you. If ignored, the cat might escalate to more noticeable behaviours, like biting. When cats bite out of frustration, they are not being mean; they are struggling to express themselves effectively.



Territorial Aggression:

Cats instinctively defend their territory from unfamiliar people or animals, perceiving them as threats to their resources or safety. Even indoor cats may guard certain areas of the home from those outside their social group. Just as humans might feel uneasy with a stranger in their space, cats can be selective about who they allow near them. Some are comfortable with larger social groups, while others prefer to keep their circle small.

Inter-Cat Tension:

Conflicts between cats in the same household can lead to aggression, often driven by different motivations. To reduce tension, ensure each cat has access to multiple, separate resources like food, water, beds, scratching posts and litter boxes. Common triggers include new pets, returning from the vet, seeing cats outside, moving or changes in routines.

Redirected Aggression:

Redirected aggression occurs when a cat is agitated but unable to reach its target, often lashing out at a nearby housemate instead. This can happen when an indoor cat sees another cat outside or during play if they are suddenly interrupted. Fear, stress and frustration are common causes of this behaviour.

Learned Aggression:

Cats may learn to use swatting or biting if it's the only way to stop unwanted interactions. For example, if a cat's cues (like lip-licking, looking away or tail flicking) are ignored when being picked up, they may resort to biting. If this gets them released, they learn biting is effective. Respecting your cat's boundaries can prevent this behaviour.

Petting-Related Aggression:

Fear, frustration, pain or stress can motivate cats to bite when they are touched. Some cats have low tolerance for physical affection, dislike touch in certain areas or at certain times (like when they are sleeping or during play) or feel overstimulated when petted. Pay attention to your cat's cues and stop if you notice signs of agitation like lip licking, tail twitching or looking at your hand when you pet them.

Misdirected Play (Injurious Play):

Misdirected play refers to normal play behaviours, like pouncing, biting and swatting, directed at an unwilling companion. This often occurs when cats do not learn appropriate play from their littermates as kittens or those who had rough play encouraged by people. Although this behaviour can lead to injuries, it is not true aggression; the intent is playful, not to drive the target away. However, if misdirected play is punished, it can lead to true aggression driven by fear, stress or frustration.



What You Can Do

- **Vet Check:** Consult your vet to see if the aggression is a symptom of illness or pain, especially if this behaviour is new or unusual for your cat.
- **Seek Professional Help:** Aggression can worsen if not handled correctly. Consult a qualified trainer or veterinary behaviourist for support.
- **Spay/Neuter:** This can help reduce hormonally driven aggressive behaviours.
- **Prevent Triggers:** Be proactive in preventing your cat from being exposed to known triggers that lead to aggressive behaviour.
- **Body Language:** Learn your cat's signals to intervene before aggression occurs.
- **Enrichment:** Meeting your cat's needs for play and mental stimulation can reduce stress.
- **More Resources:** Provide multiple separated resources for all cats in the home.
- **Positive Reinforcement:** Using rewards to encourage calm behaviour.
- **Try Pheromones:** Synthetic calming pheromones may help reduce stress in some cats.

Safety First!

- Avoid and prevent situations you know will upset your cat.
- If your cat shows signs of aggression, back away slowly and quietly and do not touch them.
- Use a barrier like a blanket or pillow to protect yourself if necessary.
- Distract your cat with treats or toys to defuse the situation.
- Give your cat a quiet space for them to calm down in.

What NOT to Do

- Never punish or scold your cat. Aggressive behaviour is a normal way for cats to communicate. Punishment will only increase their fear or stress and may lead to more aggression.
- Don't react by yelling or running away. This may trigger your cat's natural hunting instincts, making the situation worse. Stay calm, quiet and still, then redirect their focus to a toy or treat.

By understanding your cat's motivations and body language, you can take steps to reduce aggressive behaviour and create a peaceful, stress-free environment for both you and your feline friend.

Additional Resources:

For more information, visit our website: <https://www.edmontonhumanesociety.com/>

Did You Know?

You can also ask us behavioural questions by emailing: askthespecialist@edmontonhumanesociety.com

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