

# **Paws, Claws, & Jaws: Dealing with Your Kitten's Rough Play**

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We receive many calls about aggressive cats and kittens. These cute kitties bite, scratch, and/or "thump" ferociously! Although there are truly aggressive cats, it is not as common as cats who simply have not learned to play appropriately.

Kittens are very curious creatures by nature. They have to be; curiosity is their number one learning tool. Kittens, like children, learn through play and experimentation. Also like children, kittens use their mouths to get to know all of the amazing objects in their exciting environment! Kittens use their mouths to grab, chew, taste, and feel objects and their paws to grab, hold, climb, hoist, and bat all of the fun things in their homes. All of this play is necessary for cats to learn their "job," hunting and defending themselves.

It is necessary for an outside cat to be able to defend himself and hunt effectively. However, kitties with families and cozy homes need to learn a whole different set of skills to ensure a pleasant and successful home life. These pampered cats and kittens need to learn to inhibit the use of their mouths and claws when interacting with people. Remember, from the kitten's perspective, claws are for climbing trees, curtains and legs (with or without blue jeans)! Teeth are for chewing toys, shoes, belts, jewelry, hair, and moving fingers!

Cat and kitten owners must teach their pets to distinguish human skin from everything else. As with children, kittens need to be taught "manners" or behavior that is appropriate in their homes.

Here are several tips to assist in this learning process. The first tip will sound very basic. Always use appropriate and fun toys when playing with a kitten. These should be toys that can be stalked, ambushed, pounced upon, bitten, carried, and thumped! Toys should be constructed such that hands remain out of harm's way. Any fishing rod type toy fulfills these requirements. Toys or items for people to drag (e.g., string, yarn, or shoelaces) will do nicely. Do not allow cats or kittens to have unsupervised access to these items; swallowing string-like items can be quite dangerous. Safe, fun play is the goal!

Be very careful using hands to play with kittens. Kittens should be comfortable being handled so that owners can inspect ears, eyes, mouths, fur, skin and trim nails as necessary. Handling can become very challenging when the kitty is accustomed to playing roughly (i.e., biting or scratching) with the human hand. This is not to imply that "hand play" is impossible with a kitten. Parents simply have to establish certain boundaries or rules of "hand play." In the game of "chase the hand," the kitten is the predator and the hand is prey. Typically, kittens will stop "attacking" as soon as the prey "dies." So, immediately upon the touch from the kitten, the prey must "die." (Stop moving your hand.) The kitten will learn that severe attacks are not necessary to kill a hand. This type of play is not appropriate for older cats; it is primarily a learning exercise for young kittens.

If your cat or kitten plays inappropriately, be prepared to provide a consequence for this behavior. For example, try making a “chhhht” sound and/or blowing on the kitten. A water filled squirt bottle can also be used. The blow or squirt must occur only during the attack. As soon as the attack ceases, so should the blowing or squirting. This is very important. The kitten needs to learn that attacking people is not nearly as fun as playing nicely. When cats and kittens understand the rules of the household, playing is more fun for everyone.