

# ROUGH PLAY IN A KITTEN OR ADULT CAT

## THE HUMANE SOCIETY

Kittens and cats need to play. Play is normal behavior that provides young animals with opportunities to develop their physical coordination and problem-solving skills. It allows them to engage in species specific behaviors like hunting and stalking. If there's another cat in the home, it also gives them a chance to hone their social skills with members of their own species.

It's common for kittens and young cats to engage in rough, active play because feline play can consist of mock aggression. Many cats retain this kitten-like behavior well into adulthood. Cats stalk, chase, pounce, swat, kick, scratch and bite each other—all in good fun. However, people often misinterpret this kind of behavior as aggression when it's directed toward them.

Cats display two different types of play behavior: solitary play and social play. They direct solitary play toward objects, like toys, skeins of yarn, paper bags, boxes and rolled-up paper. Social play is directed toward fellow cats, people or other animals. Unfortunately, problems can sometimes arise when feline play is directed toward people. Despite the playful intentions of a cat, he can cause injury to his human playmates. Cat scratches and bites are painful and can easily become infected.

### HOW TO REDUCE YOUR CAT'S ROUGH PLAY BEHAVIOR

- A tired cat is a happy cat! The best solution for managing rough play is to make sure you're meeting your kitten's needs for activity and enrichment.
- Offer as many scheduled, routine play sessions with your cat throughout the day as possible. If you get in the habit of really engaging your cat in energetic play and then offering him a meal, his needs as a predatory animal can be met and he may meet you with less frustration when you're headed to bed, or when you'd like to relax on the couch.
- Provide a variety of toys for your cat so that you can determine his preferences. In general, cats seem to enjoy batting at small toys, like balls and fake mice. They also like to stalk, chase and pounce on things that move like prey, such as toys with feathers attached to flexible rods that you can dangle and move about. Try getting your cat a wand toy; cats love to engage in play with their people, and this is a great way to show them what appropriate play looks like. Giving your kitten a toy he can wrestle with, kick at and bite, such as a stuffed sock, is a great idea.
- Make sure that his environment is set up to keep him active during the hours that you're away from home. Most cats will nap all day long and then meet their person with a deep need to play and interact once they're home. Keeping him engaged with enrichment, battery operated toys, and feeding puzzles while you're gone can help him feel less frustration when you come home and can't play with him right away.
- Frequently give your cat new objects to investigate, such as paper bags or cardboard boxes. Try an internet search for "DIY cat enrichment" and you'll find tons of free or very inexpensive ideas that you can try with things you may already have in your home.

- During playtime, don't encourage him to bat at your hands or feet. Instead, direct the play away from you by using a long dangly toy or throwing your cat's favorite toys. Schedule play sessions to coincide with times when your cat seems most active and playful.
- Pay attention to your cat when he seeks attention. A cat seeking some pets and love will be loose, with a relaxed body and face. A cat who's seeking playtime will likely be more alert, with whiskers forward, ears and tail twitching. Understanding his body language will help direct how you interact with him, avoiding offering lots of pets if he's actually approaching looking for play.
- Also pay attention to your cat while giving him attention. If you see his body language change into play mode, it's time to grab a toy, direct him to the floor and engage in a good play session.
- If your cat likes to grab your feet as you go up and down the stairs or hide under things and ambush your ankles or legs as you walk by, carry toys with you and toss them ahead of you to redirect his attention. Try to get him to focus on chasing the toys instead of attacking you.
- Consider adopting another cat as a playmate. If you do, choose a cat with a similar energy level and play style as your cat.
- Build an outdoor enclosure for your cat, complete with branches, boxes, shelves and perches for him to navigate. If you can provide a more complex environment for your cat, full of opportunities to hunt insects and chase leaves, your cat will be less motivated to play roughly with you.

### WHAT NOT TO DO

- Do not encourage your cat to play with your hands, feet or any other body part. While it may be fun when you have a tiny kitten, it becomes painful and dangerous as your kitten grows up.
- Do not try to pet your cat when he's in play mode. Respond to his needs with lots of interaction with toys, only petting him when he's calm.
- Do not use toys that teach your cat to play with your hands, such as gloves with balls hanging from the fingers. If you do, your cat will be encouraged to direct his play at your hands and won't understand that it's only okay to attack your hands when you're wearing the toy gloves.
- Do not physically punish your cat for rough play. If you hit or slap your cat, he may perceive your actions as play and become even rougher. Alternatively, he might become fearful of your hands and respond by avoiding you or changing from play to real aggression. Do not yell at your cat or squirt him with water as these things can also lead to a negative relationship with your little one.
- Never run from your cat or try to block his movements with your feet. These actions can cause your cat to intensify his play.