



David A. Cloutier, DVM  
Michael C. McCaw, DVM  
Julie C. Keene, DVM

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1522 State Street, Veazie, Maine 04401 (207) 941-8840

## **The Feline Terrorist: Taming the Kitten with an Attitude**

By Wayne L Hunthausen, DVM, and Gary M. Landsberg, DVM, Dipl. ACMB

Young cats and kittens can be quite serious when it comes to play. For felines, play prepares them to become great hunters and helps develop social skills with other cats. But this behavior is not fun when the pet treats us like big mice or when its playful pounces puncture our skin. Although play bites are usually inhibited, and swatting is often done with retracted claws, sharp teeth, and nails can damage our clothing or inadvertently cause injury. The danger of serious injury increases when the behavior is directed toward the face, a family member with fragile skin, or toward someone with an immune deficiency disorder.

Play attack problems typically involve young cats that are alone during the day. The attacks escalate when they are reinforced by someone who thinks the behavior is cute and encourages it. Besides exploration and investigation, kitten play typically involves elements of predation such as stalking, chasing, attacking, catching and biting. Most kittens engage their peers in rough-and-tumble play. When another feline playmate is not available, a nearby family member becomes the next-best target. Although you may be an appealing target for play, you don't have the fur, defenses, or mobility of another cat, which increases the likelihood of injuries.

Avoid training a kitty to be a terrorist. Teasing a small kitten with your fingers and toes may seem like fun, but this will quickly change as the pet grows older and the bites become harder. If you want to be more to your cat than a big toy, take an early stand. While some of these little guys can become quite bloodthirsty and relentless, their behavior can be controlled.

### **Controlling the little beast**

Since play is a normal behavior, it is important that the cat has an acceptable outlet for it. Providing a feline playmate of the same age and temperament will usually draw the attack behavior away from you and toward the new buddy. Only consider this option if you are prepared to take on the extra care that a second pet warrants. If adding another pet to the home is out of the question, then you must shoulder the responsibility for providing the proper type of play and shaping your pet's behavior.

Play interaction with the cat should involve tossing or dangling toys for it to chase and catch. This directs the attacks away from you. The more vigorous the interaction, the better. Keep your kitten so busy and worn out that it doesn't even think about going after you. Check out your local pet store and stock up on all types of fun, tempting cat toys. Or provide inexpensive toys such as ping pong balls or unshelled walnuts for swatting. Adding catnip to the toy or stuffing or coating it with food can sometimes increase its appeal. A short fishing rod is great for casting small rubber or feather toys, and provides entertainment for you and your cat.

Always maintain control at playtime. Play that is initiated by the cat should be ignored or interrupted; you should start all play.

### **To swat or not to swat**

Physical punishment, such as swatting the pet or thumping it on the nose to stop rough play, should be avoided. It may cause your cat to either fear you or encourage even rougher play. A blast of air from a compressed air can (obtained from a photography store), a squirt from a water gun, or an audible alarm are safe ways to discourage behavior. This approach is only likely to work when you can anticipate an attack and are prepared to interrupt your kitten as it begins its assault. This is not always an easy task. Attacks are most likely to occur when you're making some interesting movement, such as dusting, making the bed, reading a newspaper, or walking down the stairs. Vigilance is a necessary ingredient for being consistent in teaching your kitten not to attack.

### **Up all night**

Nighttime attacks are more difficult to handle and, in most cases, the only simple solution is to keep the cat out of the bedroom when you sleep at night. Often, this behavior will decrease and finally stop as the pet grows older. If the attacks are not so bad, but the kitten has the annoying habit of waking you up by sucking on earlobes or elbows as you sleep, try applying a light coat of underarm deodorant to those areas to discourage it. Or keep a can of compressed air nearby to deter those surprise attacks.

### **Family feuds**

Problems with other cats in the home can occur when the play target is another cat that is weak, fearful, or old, and cannot tolerate the young cat's playful behavior. The pets should be kept separate unless supervised. A water gun can discourage exuberant play, and appropriate toys can keep the rambunctious cat occupied. Sometimes, the cat bearing the brunt of play attacks can become so stressed that additional help may be needed. Medication may reduce its anxiety – discuss this option with your veterinarian.

### **Nail trimming – an ounce of prevention**

Since young kittens tend to use their paws a lot in play, it's a good idea to keep those nails trimmed to prevent them from snagging sensitive skin. It's easy to condition your cat to accept nail trimming, but you must have patience and pick the right time. The very worst time to attempt nail trimming is when the pet is alert and active. (It may seem this is always the case, but all kittens eventually nap.) Handle the paw very gently, use a sharp pair of trimmers, and quickly take off the tip of one nail. If the pet continues to snooze, take the tip off another nail or two. If your cat stirs, pet it gently and give it a small treat. Never force the pet to hold still for a nail trim, and always cease before the pet squirms.