Feline Aggression

The types of aggression displayed by cats to people include:

- Petting Aggression
- Fear or Anxiety-Induced Aggression
- Redirected Aggression
- Pain Induced Aggression
- Play/Predatory Aggression
- Noise Induced Aggression
- Diseased Induced Aggression

Petting Aggression

- very offensive aggression without threat
- cat is very content while petting, and seems to enjoy it
- then suddenly it attacks person, jumps down, runs a short distance, sits, grooms, pupils dilated and runs
- this is likely a conflict behavior

Treatment

- Don't pet for prolonged times
- Desensitize cat to petting by petting for short and increasingly longer times, while rewarding the cat with food treats for tolerating petting

Fear Aggression

Causes

- Lack of socialization
- Genetics
- Inappropriate human-cat interaction (e.g., punishment)
- Avoidance conditioning: change from defensive reaction to pre-emptive offensive aggression
Signs

- Displayed when threatened, especially when cornered
- Initially defensive body language, attempts to escape
- General disposition of cat

Treatment

- Avoidance of triggering situations
- Systematic desensitization: gradual exposure and reinforcement of relaxation
- Flooding: continual exposure to full intensity stimulus and prevention of escape (not recommended except in very mild cases)
- Counter-conditioning: associating a fear-evoking situation with a pleasant experience
- Response substitution: teaching an alternative behavior in situations in which fear was shown.
- Pharmacological therapy
- Pheromone therapy

Redirected Aggression

- Redirected aggression is not really a diagnosis. Most types of aggression can be redirected to another target. Treat according to the type of aggression that was redirected.
- Typically, redirected aggression starts when a cat sees another cat outside or smells another cat and gets aggressive (territorial aggression), but can't get at the outside cat. It then redirects its aggression to another cat in the household or a person. If the aggression is directed to another cat in the household, this results in inter-cat aggression whenever the cats meet again, and will not resolve without specific treatment (see under territorial aggression). In either case (when directed towards cats or towards humans), redirected aggression is likely to occur repeatedly unless the inciting stimulus can be removed (which is often difficult with outside cats).
- A sexually aroused tom cat may redirect aggression if the owner tries to touch or restrain the cat. This form of aggression usually goes along with other sexual behavior, such as mounting female cats or grabbing them by the nape, and aggression to other tom cats.
Treatment

Treatment is best achieved by avoiding the situation (e.g., by preventing access to window sills, covering windows or keeping stray cats away). Alternatively, systematic desensitization to the aggression-evoking stimulus can be performed. However, if the stimulus is a strange cat in the yard, this is difficult to do. If the situation occurs frequently, drug desensitization using, e.g., an SSRI, may be indicated. If high testosterone levels are present, the underlying condition (e.g., neoplasia) needs to be addressed.

Pain-induced Aggression

This form of aggression may be shown in response to a painful procedure, or the anticipation of a painful procedure. Chronic pain may also increase irritability and make the cat more aggressive. Treatment involves avoidance of the trigger, systematic desensitization to situations that were previously associated with pain and now provoke an aggressive response, and the treatment of conditions resulting in chronic pain.

Play Aggression

Description

One of the most common types of aggression is play aggression. In most cases, play aggression is actually a form of predatory behavior directed to humans. While often performed in a playful and harmless manner, some cats can deliver an uninhibited bite that may cause severe injury. These cats are usually young, energetic cats living as single cats in a household, and were taken early from their mothers and siblings. Often, owners contribute to the problem by playing roughly with the cat when it is a little kitten, rewarding it for biting and clawing by continuing the play.

Redirected predatory behavior is preceded by stalking and characterized by the absence of a warning growl or hiss. The attacks are usually unprovoked. In fact, the cat often
hides behind some furniture and waits until a person walks by, and then dashes out and attacks the person's ankles. Hands dangling over the armrest of a chair are also favorite targets.

Some cases of play aggression may be redirected territorial or status-related aggression. This form of aggression may be accompanied by vocalization. The cat may lie on its back, grab the person's hand and scratch with the hind-legs against it, as if fighting with another cat. This form of aggression may become a problem in cats that have not grown up with other kittens and/or their mother and have thus not learned to inhibit their bite.

Treatment

Avoid Situations

If at all possible, situations that trigger the aggression should be avoided.

Do not make the problem worse

Confrontational reactions such as an attempt at physical punishment, or reacting to the aggression with fast movements and high-pitched vocalizations, may reinforce the aggression.

Protect yourself

To prevent further injury, put a collar with as many bells as possible on your cat, so that you can hear where she is. Carry a shield around with you (cardboard, towel) to protect yourself. Alternately, you could carry around a water bottle, but better is a canister of compressed air used for dusting electronics. Its hissing sound will deter most cats.

Redirect the behavior

Once you have interrupted an attack physically or with the compressed air, toss a toy for the cat to initiate appropriate play. Learn how to predict an attack and redirect the behavior before it occurs.

Provide interesting toys

To direct the cat's predatory behavior to other targets, provide interesting toys. You can buy toys such as the cat track, tetherball, asymmetrical balls (that won't roll in a straight
line), etc. Toys dangling from doorknobs are more interesting than toys lying on the floor.

You can also make toys. Take a cardboard box (shoebox size) and make holes in its side a little smaller than a table-tennis ball. Then put a table tennis ball into the box, and tape the box shut. Or take a larger cardboard box and make holes in the sides big enough for the cat's arms, and suspend toys from its roof inside the box. In both cases the cat will be intrigued to reach inside and bat the ball or toys around, without being able to get them out. Even paper bags can occupy cats for a long time.

Rotate toys

Cats may lose interest even in the most interesting toys if these are always around. Therefore, get or make a great variety of toys, but give only a few at a time. Take them away every evening and replace them with different ones. Your cat should not see the same toy again until a week has passed.

Provide a puzzle feeder and food toys

To keep your cat busy even more, you can make a puzzle feeder. Use a shallow plastic storage container and make a hole in a corner of the lid big enough for the cat's head. Then make slots all over the rest of the lid, just wide enough for the cat's paws. Now feed the cat dry food from this container. First put the food right under the big hole, so that cat learns to eat from the container. Later you can tilt the container first so the food slides to the far end away from the hole before setting it down. That means the cat has to paw every kibble towards the hole before being able to eat it. You can also feed the cat from a treat ball, a small Buster Cube or another food-dispensing toy.

Interact in appropriate play

To teach your cat to interact appropriately with you, and to satisfy its need for social contact, have daily play periods. In these play periods, interact with your cat only with toys, such as a feather on a string, etc. The idea is to allow for playful interaction and expression of predatory behavior without giving the cat the possibility to bite you.

Train your cat

Cats can be trained tricks in similar ways to dogs. Training your cat, e.g., to retrieve a paper ball, will make your cat WANT to interact with you in the appropriate ways that you teach it. A great way to teach a cat is to use clicker training. There are many good books and web-sites on clicker training dogs. When clicker-training a cat, keep in mind
that the sessions have to be much shorter: a cat's motivation to work for food rewards only lasts a short time (cats naturally eat frequent small meals throughout the day, while dogs eat few but large meals).

Teach bite and claw-inhibition

Eventually, you would like to interact with your cat again with your hands. Therefore, you have to teach the cat to be very careful when touching your skin, or that your skin is extremely tender. Therefore, you need to teach your cat a biting and clawing inhibition. Do this initially when the cat is calm, NOT when it is motivated to play. Gently pet or play with the cat. Don't get it excited, because then it will get rough and also won't learn. As long as the cat remains gentle, let it nibble and hold your hand. However, as soon as it puts any pressure on your skin, immediately stop playing and ignore the cat for some time. This will teach your cat to play very gently, just as one kitten would learn from another. As time goes by, you reduce the amount of pressure that you tolerate more and more. You can teach even an adult cat not to grab you with its mouth, and to never use the claws in interactions with you.

Get another cat

Since cats with play aggression are usually living as single cats, getting a second cat may help. However, the introduction of another cat can be problematic and cause a great deal of stress. Get a kitten (probably best of the opposite sex), and introduce it gradually (expose it to your cat in a cage up on furniture; rub a towel alternatively on both cats to mix up their smell). Also, make sure you can return the kitten to its source if things don't work out.

Noise-induced Aggression

Cats may respond to certain frequencies with aggression. Examples include a baby crying, another cat crying, high-frequency whistling or squeaking sounds. A possible explanation might be the elicitation of predatory behavior by high-frequency sounds.

Treatment

- Avoid these frequencies
- Possibly desensitization

Learned Aggression
There is a learning component to any aggression problem.

Additional Detail

Prevention of Feline Aggression to Humans

Prevention consist of selection of a genetically sociable cat, socialization between 2 and 7 weeks of age, leaving the kitten with the queen until 8-10 weeks of age, kitten classes (or equivalent training of individual kitten), training a bite inhibition, clicker training the cat to commands, avoiding triggering or reinforcing attacks, and environmental enrichment.