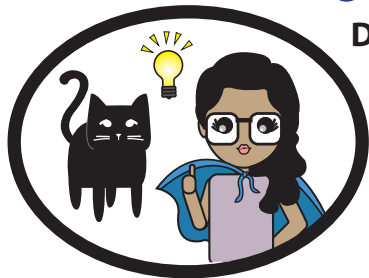


Aggression in Cats

UNDERSTANDING TRIGGERS, TARGETS, and CREATING STRATEGIES
to ADDRESS AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR

Understanding is the first step



Different inputs can be the cause of unwanted behaviors

Kitties are wonderful, mysterious, and complex creatures - that is why we love them so much! These traits can make it difficult to know where to start to better understand why they may be showing aggressive behaviors. We can read their physical cues and vocalizations to better understand what is creating stress for them. We will look at medical reasons, triggers, and targets to formulate a strategy to address aggressive behavior.

1 READING SIGNS of AGGRESSION

Recognize physical signs in your kitty to understand their feelings

Aggression is a threatening behavior that can be directed towards another cat, people, or other animals. Addressing aggressive behavior is best done when intervention can stop behaviors from escalating. Ideally, this will prevent the behavior completely. In order to intervene and prevent escalation, every cat parent must be able to spot the physical cues and better understand their kitty's feelings and why they are motivated to behave the way they do. A cat will communicate massive amounts of information through their body posture, facial expressions, and their other body parts like their tail and whiskers. Aggression can be DEFENSIVE or OFFENSIVE.



ANTAGONISTIC posture -- fearful / offensive / defensive signals:

- Arched back, hair raised
- Low, crouched, or weight forward position
- Bottle brush tail
- Stiff twitching tail
- Tail tucked around or under body
- Ears pinned to head
- Licking nose or lips
- Whiskers forward
- Dilated pupils, direct eye contact

OVERT AGGRESSION -- can be defensive or offensive

- Swatting, paw strikes
- Scratching
- Fighting
- Biting
- Growling, Yowling, Howling
- Lying on side exposing all claws and teeth

TYPES of AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR in CATS:

- TERRITORIAL - Cats patrol their territory and may lash out against those they perceive as intruders
- PREDATORY / RESOURCE GUARDING - Cats hunt for food and may try to aggressively protect their resources
- FEARFUL or DEFENSIVE - Cats become aggressive if they feel they cannot escape a perceived threat
- CAT to CAT - mating scuffles, personality clashes, and lack of positive interactions can trigger aggression
- PLAY - rough play can send a kitty into a high-stress situation causing rambunctious and aggressive behavior
- REDIRECTED - kitty is unable to act innately in the moment, they turn their aggression and frustration elsewhere
- OVERSTIMULATION - physical contact like too much petting, prodding, or roughhousing
- MATERNAL - mama cats seeing a threat against her kittens
- IDIOPATHIC - undetermined cause / can't be explained with medical or behavioral evaluation
- MEDICAL - pain-induced stress and irritability can cause aggressive behavior

Aggression in Cats

UNDERSTANDING TRIGGERS, TARGETS, and CREATING STRATEGIES
to ADDRESS AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR and CREATE CALM

2 Rule out MEDICAL issues



Pain-induced stress and irritability can trigger aggression

Cats hide their pain well so they do not appear weak or vulnerable to predators. Because we may not see the cause of their pain, aggression sometimes comes out as a reaction to not feeling well. Just like humans, if we are feeling bad, we might lash out. Make sure kitty has had a thorough medical examination to rule out any potential medical issues that may be causing their aggression. Even something like a toothache may be the reason for increased irritability and aggressive behavior.

3 TRIGGERS and TARGETS



Use your detective skills to read behaviors and see the trigger for their aggression.

It could be an outdoor kitty that they see walk past their favorite window every day. They may feel threatened territorially but never have contact with the "threat" causing stress and aggression.

The trigger is the outdoor kitty, but the target may be another cat or family member.

It is important to try and decipher triggers and remove them to avoid escalating emotions.

If another resident cat is the trigger, then separation may be necessary for inter-cat aggression.

See our handout on Cat to Cat Introduction. This process can work to reintroduce and reset kitty relationships where there has been past aggression.

I recommend keeping a journal to record interactions to help see patterns of behavior.

Once you know what triggers your kitty and what they target with their aggression, do everything you can to remove those triggers. This will help to manage their fear, stress, and anxiety.

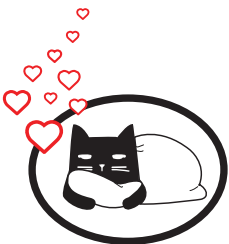
4 DETERRENTS



Deterrents help to remove triggers and can help recondition behavioral reactions.

For example, if kitty is antagonized by outdoor critters, keep drapes on that window so he can't see them. You could also use motion-activated devices like SSSCAT that deliver a small poof of air to deter kitty from going to a certain area that may contain emotional triggers, like the critter window.

5 ENRICHMENT - create safety and happiness!



Congrats! You now know how to read your kitty's behaviors, better understand how they are feeling, and you can minimize triggers that cause aggression. Now, it's time to make sure they have lots of emotional and environmental enrichment! That's a fancy way to say kitties need to feel safe, loved, and happy - just like us! Make sure to cover the basics and create a SAFE ZONE for them where they feel calm and relaxed. This is the spot they can call their own when they feel scared or anxious. Their space should be very enriching with fresh food and water, soft cozy places to snooze, cat towers, scratching posts, and lots of toys, catnip, and other fun stuff! Kitty should feel safe and calm here, so pheromones, calming collars, and treats or supplements can help curb feelings of anxiety and stress. Prescription medicine is also an option, but I use this as a last resort. Make sure to have lots of playtime, cuddles, and treats in the safe space so kitty creates tons of positive memories there, especially with you! The more positive associations you can make with your kitty, the less likely they are to feel stressed or anxious and have unwanted aggression. Your strong bond with them will give kitty confidence and feelings of deep happiness!