

FELINE AGGRESSION: TYPES AND SUGGESTIONS

Aggression is a serious and dangerous behaviour problem for cat owners. There are many different types of aggression. In some cases medical conditions can contribute to aggression. Before a behaviour consultation your cat must have a thorough physical examination and blood test to rule out medical conditions. To treat aggression, it's necessary to determine which type of aggression your cat displays. Also determine in what circumstances your cat is aggressive and whether the aggression is toward family members, strangers, other pets in the house hold, or strange pets. Keeping a diary can be particularly useful. More than one form of aggression may be exhibited. Behaviour modification techniques and/or changes to the pet's environment will be necessary to correct most aggressive problems. Making a diagnosis, determining the prognosis (the change of safe and effective correction) and developing an appropriate treatment plan are usually best handled with a animal behaviour specialist. Drug therapy can be a useful part of treatment for some forms of aggression and needs to be addressed by a veterinarian.

Fear Aggression

Fear aggression arises when a cat is exposed to people, other animals, places or stimuli (e.g. noises) that the cat is unfamiliar with, or to situations previously associated with an unpleasant experience. Although many cats may retreat when fearful, those that are in their own territory or are prevented from retreating because they are cornered are more likely to fight. If the stimulus (person or animal), retreats or the pet is harmed or further frightened in any way (e.g. a fight, punishment), the fear is likely to be further aggravated. In addition people or animals that do not approach in a calm, confident or friendly manner are more likely to be met with a fearful response. Fear aggression toward family members might arise out of punishment or other unpleasant experiences associated with them. Many cases of fear aggression are seen as combinations or complicating factors of other forms of aggression (territorial, maternal, redirected, etc.). Fearful body postures (your cat's ears flattened out on the side of his head, dilated pupils, whiskers bristles forward, hissing or growling and tucking his body low to the ground) in conjunction with aggression are diagnostic of fear aggression.

Counter conditioning and desensitization techniques can help teach your cat that the stimulus brings good things such as treats or play time. The process to recovery will take time and patience. Medication prescribed by your veterinarian can also be helpful in resolving fear aggression issues.

Play Aggression

Play aggression is commonly shown by young cats toward people or other pets in the family. Overly rambunctious play along with grabbing, stalking, pouncing, nipping or biting of people or their clothing, are common signs of play aggression. Although it is a normal behaviour it can lead to injuries. If handled incorrectly it could lead to more serious forms of aggression as your cat matures.

The best prevention is to never teach your cat to play with using yourself as a toy (hands, feet, and clothing). The rules need to be made very clear that your cat can never bite people. Providing any inconsistencies in this rule confuses a cat and can cause undue stress and anxiety. Encourage you cat to play with toys that are an extension of your body, such as a Pom Pom wand or toys such as a Feline Flyer that your cat engages with. This way your cat can chase, pounce and bite the toys. Several interactive toys are available in the store at the Calgary Humane Society.

Territorial aggression

Territorial aggression can be exhibited toward people or other animals (usually other cats) that approach or reside on the pet's property. Territorial aggression can occur towards cats outside of the

home, but also toward cats that live in the household. This may be with the addition of another cat, or when resident cats reach social maturity at 1-2 years of age.

To help a cat with territorial aggression, you need to block all window access where your cat can see neighbouring cats or other animals intruding in the property. Use citrus / lemon smells or other deterrents outside to help discourage other cats from entering your yard. For more details please refer to our handout on Feline Territorial Aggression.

Predatory Aggression

Predation is the instinctive desire to chase and hunt prey. Predatory behaviours include stalking, chasing, attacking, and ingestion of prey animals, but may occasionally be directed at people or other pets. Although the desire to chase can be reduced by using desensitizing and counter conditioning in the presence of the stimuli, this is a very dangerous form of aggression, which must be prevented. If the behaviour is directed toward small pets in the home, confining those pets to a room where the cat does not have access is best. If the behaviour is directed to animals outside, then keeping the cat indoors is a solution. Predatory aggression may be part of play aggression in young cats.

To work on predatory aggression, desensitization and counter conditioning methods can be used to reduce the desire for a cat to chase. Teaching your cat to chase more appropriate items (short duration with lots of breaks) such as toys can help as it gives your cat a means to release his predation in a safe manner. A cat that is already in the chase or stalking mode can be discouraged by a loud noise air horn, shaker can (an empty pop can with several pennies) or a squirt of water. Once your cat's behaviour has been interrupted, encourage him to play and chase a toy.

Pain Induced Aggression

Pain induced aggression is usually elicited by handling or contact that elicits pain or discomfort. However, even if your cat is not exhibiting pain, certain medical conditions (endocrine imbalances, organ disease, etc.) may make the pet more irritable and prone to aggression. Fear and anxiety further compound many of these cases. Once your cat learns that aggression is successful at removing the stimulus, aggression may recur when similar situations arise in the future, whether or not the pain is still present.

Treatment requires first that the medical or painful condition be resolved. Next, identify the types of handling and situations that have led to aggression in the past. With desensitization and counter conditioning, your cat can slowly and gradually get accustomed to accept and enjoy these situations. Once the cat learns that there is no further discomfort associated with the handling, and that there are positive rewards, the problem should resolve.

Redirected Aggression

Aggression that is directed toward a person or pet that did not initially evoke the aggression is classified as redirected. Redirection is likely to occur when the cat is aroused and a person or other pet intervenes or approaches.

Cats that are highly aroused must be avoided (do not try to interact with your cat including petting, looking at approaching to talking to your cat), from several hours up to 48 hours. Since redirected aggression arises out of other forms of aggression, it is important to identify and treat the initial cause of aggression (e.g. fear, territorial, other animals outside), or to prevent the problem by avoiding exposure.

Petting Induced Aggression

Some cats bite while being petted. Some cats are intolerant of all handling, but most cats with petting aggression accept a certain amount of petting but then become highly agitated and attack when they have had enough. This can be difficult to understand since many of these cats seek attention and at the outset seem to enjoy physical contact from the owner. It seems that these cats have a certain threshold for the amount of physical interaction that they can tolerate.

First, identify and avoid responses that might increase your cat's fear or anxiety (e.g. punishment, uninvited approaches and handling) and make all handling experiences positive. When handling, physical restraint must be avoided as cats that are placed in a position where they feel constrained or unable to escape might become aggressive. Do not approach, confront, or lift your cat, unless it approaches for affection. At this point call the cat onto your lap (perhaps with a command, or bell), and begin light stroking without any physical restraint. After a brief session put the cat on the floor and give a reward such as food, play, or a catnip or honey suckle toy. At each subsequent session, when the cat is ready for affection, call the cat onto your lap, and pat or stroke a little longer before putting the cat down and providing the reward. Be aware that as you approach the limit of your cat's tolerance of petting, anxiety and aggression will recur. This limit can often be evidenced by a change in the cat's demeanor. Usually the cat will begin to rapidly move the tail back and forth, the pupils may dilate and the ears go back, or the cat may begin to lick or act agitated, try and stay below this threshold and cease petting before the cat becomes anxious. Although shaping may greatly increase the number and length of petting session your cat will accept and enjoy, you will need to learn and accept your cat's limitations. Tellington Touch is a method that uses gentle touches, strokes and lifts. The touches can alter behaviour and enhance the behaviour between you and your cat. We have books, DVD's and offer courses in Tellington Touch at the Calgary Humane Society.

Maternal Aggression

Maternal aggression is directed toward people or other animal that approach the mother cat with her kittens.

With desensitization, counter conditioning, good control and highly motivating rewards, it may be possible to train your cat to accept handling of the kittens. Once the kittens are weaned, spaying should be considered to prevent recurrence.

Learned Aggression

Learning is an important component of most types of aggression. Whenever a cat learns that aggression is successful at removing the stimulus, the behaviour is further reinforced. Pets that are threatened or punished for aggressive displays may become even more aggressive each time the situation recurs.

You need to find out what stimulus triggers aggression so that you address the issue. With desensitization and counter conditioning, your cat is not only taught that the stimulus is safe, but that it is associated with a reward.

Other Causes of Aggression

Aggression with medical disorders may arise at any age, may have a relatively sudden onset and may not fit feline species typical behaviour. Some medical conditions can, on their own, cause aggression, but in many cases a combination of behavioural factors and medical problems cause the pet to pass a certain threshold at which aggression is displayed. Infectious agents such as rabies, hormonal imbalances such as hyperthyroidism, psychomotor epilepsy, neoplasia, and a variety of generic and metabolic disorders can cause or predispose a cat to aggression. Painful conditions such as dental disease or arthritis, and medical conditions causing fever, fatigue or sensory loss might increase the pet's irritability.

In rare circumstances, aggression has no identifiable etiology (idiopathic) and not particular stimuli that initiate the aggression displays. There may be a genetic propensity to aggression.