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Cat Aggression

General Information

Cat owners sometimes have difficulty understanding why their cat, who seems friendly one minute, may suddenly bite or scratch them the next. It may also be difficult to tell how well any pair or group of cats will tolerate each other. Some aggressive behaviors are part of normal behavioral patterns. These include territorial aggression, intermale aggression, defensive aggression, redirected aggression, leave-me-alone aggression, or playful aggression. Any kind of aggressive cat can be dangerous, however! Cat bites are seldom reported, but may actually occur more frequently than dog bites. Resolving a cat's aggressive behavioral problems may take help from your veterinarian or even an animal behavior expert. Remember that resolving aggression problems among cats often takes time, commitment, and sometimes compromise from you.

Causes

There are several types of cat aggression. Each type has its own combination of causal factors. Cat aggression may be caused by fear, stress, lack of socialization, maternal protection instinct, play, or general communication. It is important to determine what style of aggression your cat is displaying in order to find the best and most appropriate solutions. Cat aggression can be normal communication, territorial behaviors, intermale aggression, defensive behaviors, redirected aggression (frustration and anxiety), playful aggression, or from medical or physical discomfort.

Addressing the Problem

It is important to first rule out any medical problems. Once those are ruled out, work to understand the cause of the problem and try to find a solution. Sometimes solutions will include tracking your cat's behavioral history, treating medical problems, making environmental changes, and reshaping the cat's behavior. Follow these tips to address cat aggression:

- Learn to read your cat's body language and subtle stress cues
- Encourage acceptable cat play – never use your hands or body as toys
- Discourage nipping or rough play with a deterrent such as removing yourself from play, emitting a short startling sound, or a quick burst of air
- Redirect unwanted or rough play by encouraging play with a toy
- Provide your cat with outlets to release energy
- Never tap, flick, hit, slap, throw, or use force or pain to stop rough play or aggression
- Spay or neuter your cat to eliminate intermale and some territorial aggression
- In multiple cat households, keep all resources (food, water, bedding, litter boxes) available and plenty
- Separate cats and slowly reintroduce
- Use environmental and behavioral enrichment for proper mental and physical stimulation
- Use behavioral modification supplements such as synthetic cat pheromones, if needed
- Consult with your veterinarian or an animal behavior specialist, if needed

Remember:

Cat bites and scratches can easily become infected. Always carefully and thoroughly clean all wounds from cats. It is recommended that you seek medical attention if you have been bitten by a cat.