My Cat Bites Me. What Can I do?

January 9, 2014 By Alana Stevenson

Q: "I have a 10 month old male cat. He bites me all the time and if I get up and reprehend him he will growl and attack my legs. I think he's just trying to get attention but I need to fix this, he hurts me sometimes. He came to our home 4 months old and I think he never played with brothers/sisters so he doesn't know that biting can be harmful… He only does this to me and not my husband. When he wants to cuddle or lap he prefers me too.. What can I do? (thank you and excuse my English, it's a little bit rusty…!)" – Raquel

A: This is most likely play-aggression and is fairly typical in young cats, especially cats who were raised alone and are restless or living in apartments or homes without many outlets to expend their energy or hunting instincts. Often cats who are weaned too early can exhibit play-aggression too. It usually occurs in young cats who are 'singletons.' Cats can live into their twenties. Ten months is still a kitten, so your cat will have a lot of energy and needs to learn appropriate ways to expend it. He needs a lot of environmental enrichment too. You didn't mention if people are gone during the day due to work and/or if he is banned from sleeping in the bedroom. Both of these will exacerbate play aggression, making it much worse.

So here are some tips on things you can do.

Conduct interactive play sessions that stimulate hunting behavior so your cat can strategize and 'stalk' the toy. Read How to Play with Your Cat for tips on how to stimulate hunting behavior through playing with toys. Oftentimes, the way people play with their cats leave cats frustrated and cats will lose interest.

No punishments. This includes blowing at your cat, hitting your cat on the nose, scruffing your cat, jumping up and stomping your feet or clapping loudly, squirting your cat, hissing at your cat or yelling at your cat. All of these tactics will exacerbate play-aggression and/or will make your cat frightened of you. If your cat is fearful of you, you will damage the relationship you have with your cat. Your cat will also tend to bite down harder or attack you and then run away and hide. If another member of the family is harsher with your cat, your cat will simply be more play-aggressive with you and more avoidant of the harsher family member.

Avert your gaze and avoid eye-contact when you sense your cat is wanting to attack you or grab onto you. This is very important. Directly staring at your cat, even in anticipation of your cat biting you or lunging at you, will aggravate the situation. Instead, simply look away and avert your gaze. You must do this before your cat holds onto your leg or goes to bite you.

If your cat grabs onto your hand, go limp. Be passive. Slowly remove your hand, but do not pull your hand away or try to wrestle with your cat. This will only intensify your cat's need to hold on. Remember to avert your gaze, as you passively remove yourself.

If your cat jumps onto your leg, try to stand still. Look away from your cat. When your cat has settled, walk slowly, avoiding eye-contact. This eliminates the thrill of the attack. It does not scare your cat, and it also makes attacking you less enjoyable and rewarding.

Use play intervention and end with treats. Back to the play again. Playing with your cat is incredibly important. Keep interactive toys – such as pole toys – in strategic locations. When you see your cat getting angst or anticipate an attack, redirect your cat's focus to the toy. Again, read How to Play with Your Cat for tips on playing to entice your cat. If you wave the pole toy or dangle a toy over your cat's head or at his face, it will not work or your cat will lose interest in the toy quickly. You can also carry little, tiny balls or very small toy mice and roll them for your cat as you enter a room or walk down the stairs. Always end play with food or treats. This winds down play and provides your kitty with a sense of accomplishment.

How you touch your cat can also encourage biting. Reaching directly over your kitty's head or frequently towards his face, tickling his belly, or petting his lumbar region (area above the hips and below the torso) may solicit a swat or a bite from him. Be cognizant of how your cat responds to you and your manners of touch. Do more of what he likes, and less of what he doesn't.

Increase vertical territory and warm sleeping areas. Cats love warmth and they like soft surfaces. They also like to climb and to be on higher surfaces. Adding plush fleece throws on furniture, putting up cat trees or cat condos, attaching soft window perches to windows and allowing your cat on higher surfaces will keep your cat more engaged and will relax your cat, which will decrease play-aggression.

Make sure to provide your cat with **good cat scratchers**.

You might also think of entertaining your kitty with some **kitty DVD's** – DVD's made for cats.

Be sure your cat has access to food at all times. Free-feed your kitty (Leave food out for your cat to nibble on). If you restrict feedings and ration your cat's meals, your cat's play-aggression will intensify. Restricting food in young cats and eliminating the ability to free-feed can cause aggressive behavior in cats.

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