

INTRODUCTION TO FELINE AGGRESSION

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INTRODUCTION

Considering their size, domestic cats can make formidable adversaries. Unlike dogs, cats have not one but five attack weapons, including a widely opening mouth, well-appointed with penetrating teeth, and four dexterous paws bearing needle-sharp claws. The combination of these weapons, explosive speed, and the exquisite suppleness of a contortionist can make restraining disinclined cats more difficult than herding these independent creatures.

Every veterinarian knows that it is far better to avoid a cat's ire than it is to contend with it once the cat's enraged. Thus, the soft-shoe approach of gentle handling and minimal physical restraint is the best one to adopt when handling cats. Once a cat's anger has boiled over it is best to give the cat time out to calm down before proceeding with any necessary intervention. Or, if it's absolutely necessary to proceed immediately, it's best to resort to sedatives or full physical restraint.

TYPES OF AGGRESSION

As with other species, there are several different ways of classifying aggression. One describes aggression as either instrumental (as a vehicle to achieve some desired goal), fear-induced, territorial, sexual, irritable, maternal or predatory. This classification is commonly employed when discussing the different types of aggression in animals and is descriptive of purpose, as opposed to function. Furthermore, it has been added to over the years to include other terms such as petting-induced aggression, pain-induced aggression, and idiopathic aggression (of unknown cause).

An alternative method of classifying aggression is into affective and predatory types. The former means with enhanced mood change, and the latter refers to the relatively unemotional business of predation, i.e. procuring prey by hunting and killing. The affective variety of aggression can be further sub-divided into offensive and defensive types, with offensive aggression involving striking out at another animal in order to achieve some "selfish" goal whereas defensive aggression is self-protective and occurs in response to some real or perceived threat.

BODY LANGUAGE FOR OFFENSIVE AGGRESSION

- Ears forward or sideways
- Pupils slit like or slightly rounded
- Body posture with the rump higher than the shoulders giving a slanting-forward impression
- Eyes riveted on the target and head moving slightly from side to side
- Low pitched growl
- Tail held horizontal or vertically down with the tail tip swishing from side to side

BODY LANGUAGE FOR DEFENSIVE AGGRESSION

- Ears held flat against the head pointing backwards
- Pupils of the eyes widely dilated
- Piloerection – hair on the body standing up on end giving the cat a puffed up appearance, including a large bushy tail
- Crouching body posture or arched back
- Tail curved under or to the side
- Open mouth threat with hissing and spitting
- Claws unsheathed and ready for action

BODY LANGUAGE FOR PREDATORY AGGRESSION

- Little or no mood change except intense concentration
- Hunting stalking behavior
- Crouching and then springing
- Grasping with claws and biting

Aggression is a natural behavior for the cat and was a survival-related behavior for the cats' wild ancestors. Although cats have long been thought of as solitary creatures, it has recently been recognized that they can live in true societies and that some may develop as leaders or "alpha" cats. To achieve this status they must possess certain willfulness and be physically competent.

Cats of this persuasion will use affective offensive aggression "instrumentally" to procure certain assets and privileges for themselves in preference to other cats. In the home, this type of aggression, formerly referred to as "petting-induced aggression," may sometimes be expressed toward compliant owners. This aggression, dubbed "the dominant, alpha cat syndrome," involves biting the owner over resources such as food, toys, or resting place, as an attention-getting mechanism, and when the owner tries to make the cat do something he doesn't want to do or pets it for too long. Territorial aggression (in defense of a defined territory), maternal aggression (in defense of new kittens), and sexual aggression (between males in competition for a receptive female or occurring before or after mating by the female) are variations on the theme of offensive aggression.

Defensive, or fear aggression, whether targeted toward an offending person or another cat, is another fairly common form of feline aggression. It occurs most frequently in cats that have not been raised with appropriate exposure to other cats or people at a formative time of their development, or in cats that have had adverse exposure to people or other cats.

Many people feel that predatory aggression should not be included as a true type of aggression because it has no social or self-protective function and is not associated with significant mood change. It is, from the cat's point of view, simply a way of getting lunch. However, if you define aggression as a physical act that causes injury or death to another party, predatory aggression does qualify as a type of aggression. In the wild, predatory aggression occurs in a sequence that has arbitrarily been divided into an appetitive phase and a consummatory phase.

The appetitive phase includes the hunting, stalking, and capture of prey whereas the consummatory phase involves merely ingestion of the prey animal. Predatory aggression is most often a problem when expressed as predatory play by young kittens that pounce at people's hands or moving feet. In the older cats, predatory aggression is sometimes displaced onto moving toys, or is expressed as longing looks at goldfish bowls, birdcages, and birds fluttering outside the window. In such cases, the cat's jaw may chatter slightly as his tail switches back and forth in wishful anticipation.

Finally, there are some pathological forms of aggression that can simulate any or all of the above types of aggression. Pathological aggression may occur out of context, in response to trivial stimuli, or an exaggerated form. Hyperthyroidism (overactivity of the thyroid gland), partial seizures, infectious problems, and nutritional deficiencies

are examples of conditions that may cause pathological aggression. Medical causes of aggression, like these, should be ruled out by your veterinarian before embarking on any behavior modification strategy.