

What's Bugging Your Crabby Tabby?

RESOLVING FELINE AGGRESSION PART III

Part one of this series on cat-to-human biting and scratching covered play aggression, pain aggression and over-stimulation. Part two covered fear/defensive aggression and redirected aggression. In this, the final installment of the series, we will delve into the less common categories of feline aggression: learned, maternal, territorial and pathophysiological.

Bad Behavior = Good Reward

The first time Sheila's cat, Childe Harold, attacked her toes while she slept, it was simply a case of nocturnal play aggression. But instead of ignoring Harold's behavior, Sheila made a fatal error – she bought off his attentions by slipping him a predawn breakfast. Albeit unwittingly, Sheila became a victim of learned aggression. Harold learned that if he attacked the caretaker, he reaped a reward. Whether the reward is food, play or the cessation of an undesirable activity, such as grooming or nail trimming, cats quickly learn that it pays to be aggressive.

Withdrawing the reward may eventually put an end to the aggression, but the attacks may get worse before they stop. If your cat stops getting results from his inhibited attacks, he may put more effort into trying to achieve the desired reward. This is called an extinction burst. Ignore the behavior without giving in, and it will eventually stop. However, if your cat's attacks are particularly vicious, it may be wiser to avoid them entirely or arm yourself with a squirt gun or can of compressed air to deter the cat before the biting intensifies.

Motherly Love

Maternal aggression occurs when a new mom becomes overly protective of her litter. In doing so, she will run any interlopers out of the nursery. This hormonally influenced behavior is most commonly and justifiably focused on other cats – intact males in particular have been known to cannibalize newborn kittens – but it may also be directed toward humans.

Maternal aggression is most problematic during the first three to four weeks after birth, when the kittens are the most vulnerable. If the mother cat is charging at you, manage her aggression by leaving her and her kittens alone for the first few weeks if all are healthy. As the kittens mature, lure mom out of the nursery for food or play time while another family member socializes the kittens. After the kittens are weaned, spay mom to prevent this ordeal from ever happening again.

Who Goes There?

Cats are territorial creatures. Males and, to a lesser degree, females stake their claims by spraying urine, scratching or rubbing oil from scent glands on trees, doorways and other surfaces. Claim jumpers are either chased off or fought.

Most cases of territorial aggression are between cats. However, there are cases where the resident feline will try to run unfamiliar humans off his perceived turf. Most likely, he is responding to the odor of other animals on his victim. Ask your guests to wash up and change into freshly laundered clothes before visiting. Unfortunately, this type of aggression, though rare, is particularly hard to resolve, and if Felix still acts as though all visitors are usurpers, the best way to manage the situation is to confine him before company arrives.

It's All Physical

Upon waking one morning, you discover that your normally placid cat has triggered the tiger within – acting out in an aggressive manner. But his aggression doesn't seem to fit into any of the categories previously discussed in this series. What's a beleaguered caretaker to do? Head straight for the veterinarian's office!

Pathophysiological aggression may be the result of a painful reaction to impacted anal sacs, lower urinary tract disease, arthritic changes, oral lesions, or an infection. Or it may be a response to a medical condition such as hypothyroidism, hyperthyroidism, epilepsy or a brain tumor, or a neurological disorder related to trauma, poisoning, feline ischemic encephalopathy (a degenerative brain disease) or the "furious" stage of rabies. Careful observation – and veterinary assistance if necessary – will reveal the reason for your crabby tabby's uncharacteristic crankiness.

No matter the type of aggression, if your cat is exhibiting any of these signs, it's time to take action. If you feel uncertain about what course to try, consult your veterinarian or local shelter for referral to a feline behaviorist. While not all aggression problems can be resolved, you won't know how successful you can be until you take the first step.

