



## Cat Aggression

An aggressive cat can cause havoc in the home. Family members start to avoid areas where the cat may be. Friends don't want to visit. There is constant stress of wondering when it's going to happen next.

Not only do aggressive cats cause fear, they can cause serious injuries through scratching and biting. A cat bite injects bacteria under the skin and can develop into a serious infection if not attended to properly.

### Vet Visit

Before treating any behavior problem, your cat must first be examined to rule out any health issues. If the underlying health problem is not addressed, any behavioral training will be unsuccessful. Since cats are very good at hiding illness, you may not realize your cat is sick.

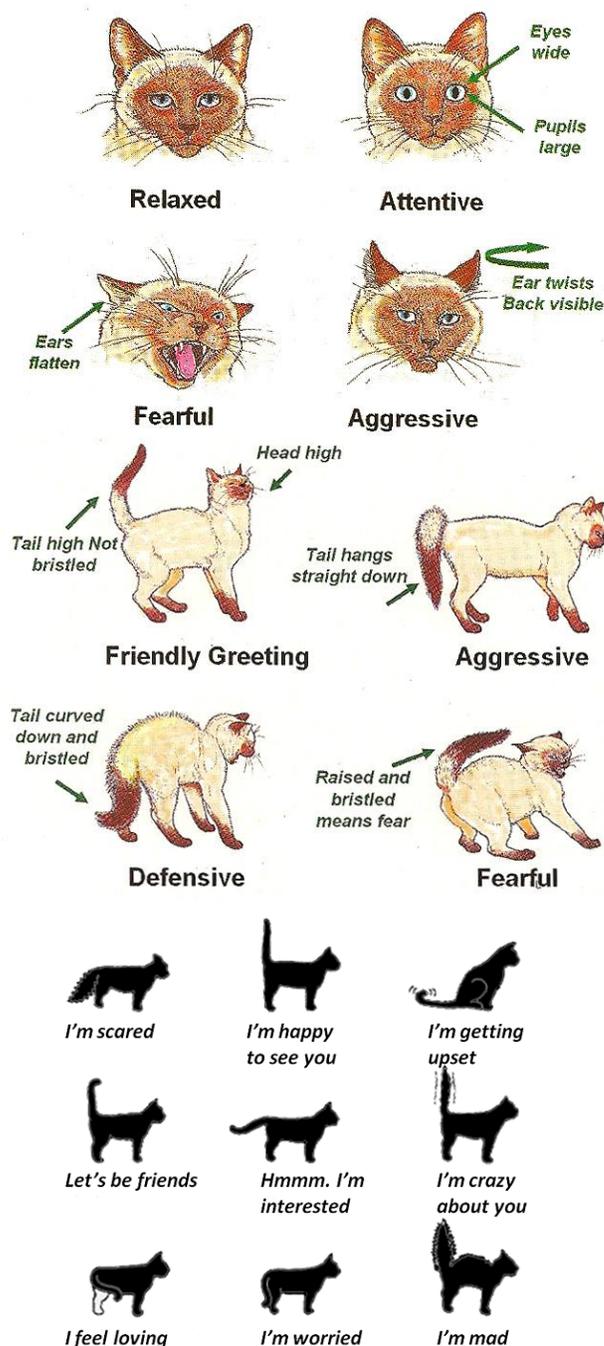
The veterinarian will fully examine your cat and perform any needed tests to determine if there are underlying problems, such as pain, causing your cat to be aggressive. If your cat is healthy or still aggressive after medical treatment, the next step is behavior modification.

### Cat body language

It is important to understand what your cat is trying to tell you. Some aggression issues can be a simple misunderstanding of your cat. Cats use very subtle signs to communicate. Often, it's as simple as a flick of the tail or a turn of the ears.

A wagging tail means something very different in a cat compared to a dog. A cat that is wagging its tail is irritated. Also, watch the ears. When your cat turns his ears back, it's a sign of aggression. By paying close

attention, you can usually identify these signs (tail flicking and ears back) before your cat attacks.



## ***Beware of the Situation***

Try to identify the trigger for aggression. To do this, think about the situation surrounding the aggressive behavior. Where did it happen? What time of day? Is it always at the same time or place? What happened just prior to the aggressive behavior? What were you (or the person or pet being attacked) doing right before the attack? Was there food or a toy involved? Was a particular spot such as a bed involved?

The answer to these questions will help you understand what may be triggering the aggression. Knowing the trigger is the best way to improve the behavior.

## ***Aggression towards Humans***

Cats can show **play aggression** and become too worked up when playing. This is usually seen as a cat attacking your feet or hands. If you view it from your cat's prospective, your hands and feet are play toys.

To stop the behavior, you must change his definition of toys. Do not use your hands or feet for play. Instead, offer toys before he attacks. Throw them away from you to redirect his focus.

**Petting aggression** can be common with cats. This is usually a case of misunderstanding. Your cat thinks he has given you a signal to stop petting and you ignored it. When in reality, you probably didn't even notice the subtle sign (such as a tail flick).



Most cats are not this clear when they try to tell you to stop petting.

If your cat is aggressive after being petted for too long, only pet him once or twice and look at his body language. Many cats prefer you only pet them on the head. Respect your cat's wishes.

If you cat is irritated or excited about something else, they may turn on you if you touch them. This is called **redirected aggression**. Their energy is so focused on

something they cannot reach that when you touch them they unleash that energy on you.

This often occurs if there is an outside cat that your cat can see from inside. Due to their territorial nature, your cat would prefer to run them off the property but get agitated instead.



Here you can see the indoor cat (black) is irritated. His ears are turned back.

If your cat is upset or highly excited (during play with another pet), leave him alone. Let him calm himself down. To avoid redirected aggression, keep the blinds closed or place motioned sensor water sprinklers or canned air to deter other cats from coming in your yard.

## ***Aggression between Cats***

Stress is a major cause of intercat aggression. A cat may be stressed because they feel that their territory is being threatened (by outdoor cats) or they don't have a safe place to hide.



To decrease your cat's stress, exercise is important. Make sure your cat plays 30 minutes every day to allow that energy to escape. Changing your cat's territory can also help. Expand the areas where your cat can go. Place shelves and steps for your cat to use vertical space. Add a cat tree to the space. Offer several hiding spaces to allow your cat to feel secure.

If you are introducing a new cat, make sure to do it over a period of several days (or weeks if needed). Introduce them on either side of a closed door first. Introduce their smells to each other (such as a blanket they slept on). By going slow, you can avoid aggression in the first place.

There are products available to help ease stress and fear. Feliway® is a pheromone to spray in a room or use as a diffuser to help calm your cat. There are calming prescription foods and calming treats that may help.

## **Aggression towards Another Pet**

A cat may be aggressive towards another pet (usually the dog) for a variety of reasons. Again, try to identify the trigger. Cats tend to be territorial over certain areas at certain times of day.

For example, Mittens thinks of the couch as her spot every day after lunch, when the sun hits it just right. Jack, the dog, doesn't know this and is sleeping comfortably in Mittens' spot. Mittens becomes irritated and strikes at Jack. At this point, all you usually hear is a yelp. The trigger is the location. Therefore, to avoid this situation, get Jack his own bed in another location.



Cats can become irritated at dogs if they invade their space by walking too close. Avoid situations like this by allowing the cat to be higher than the dog. Make sure they are not at the dog's eye level. Cats prefer elevated areas where they can look down on everything.

Just as it can be difficult for us to see cat body language, dogs and other pets may not see it either until it is too late.

## **Positive Reinforcement**

Do not use physical punishment. Even a light tap on the nose can increase fear and anxiety. Instead, use positive reinforcement (such as giving treats) when your cat does something good. If your cat doesn't like treats but loves to play with the laser light, use this as a reward instead. The idea is to provide a stress free, positive link between the behavior you want and the

behavior your cat gives you. You can also give positive reinforcement before aggression occurs to help avoid unwanted behavior. If you cat doesn't like new guests, have them give treats or play with the cat.

## **Summary**

These are the common cases of aggression seen in cats. Be aware of the situation and look at it from your cat's point of view. You may be surprised what you see when you look. The cat may be stressed without you realizing it and providing hiding places and elevated perches may help.

With simple changes, you may be able to avoid feline aggression. However, if a cat threatens children or fragile adults, or if someone is afraid of the cat, the situation is more serious. You should consult with an animal behavior specialist if you are not able to resolve the problem on your own.

