

## Kitten Hisses and Bites

**CatChannel behavior expert Marilyn Krieger, CCBC, explains why a cat with a history of abuse can be hard to control.**

*By Marilyn Krieger*

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**Q:** My sister and I adopted some kittens that were hurt and were being used by someone for target practice. My kitten is wonderful and loving. But my sister's cat hisses all the time and bites and scratches her kids. She is at her wits end and is almost at the point of taking the kitten to an animal shelter. Is there anything she can do to change the kitten's behavior? We think they are probably 5 to 6 months old, and they have not been neutered yet.

**A:** Thank you for saving these kittens and giving them the chance to live happy, love-filled lives. It is not uncommon for cats that have been abused to have intense fear responses after they are rescued from awful circumstances. These little ones have been through a major trauma and were probably treated poorly throughout their short lives, until you and your sister rescued them. Because of the trauma, the kittens need to be treated as special kittens with special needs.

Children can be a frightening experience even for kittens raised in loving, nurturing families. These two kittens have suffered terrible abuse, and it is understandable that your sister's kitten is responding the way he is to the children. Your sister's children need to help the kitten feel safe and secure by always being extra gentle and quiet around him and never forcing their attentions on the kitten. The kitten should never be grabbed or chased. When playing with the kitten, never use hands. Instead, use toys to play. Fishing pole toys and soft balls are good toys to use. Using hands when playing with a cat can result in the cat biting and scratching during play and non-play times. Make sure that the fishing pole toys are always placed out of reach of the kitten when he's not being played with.

When the kitten does bite or scratch, do not punish or yell at him. This little kitten is very fragile and punishment will sever the cat-human bond that so needs to be established. Instead, give him a timeout by immediately stopping all contact with him and leaving the room. The timeout doesn't have to be more than about 30 seconds. Be sure not to interact with the kitten when he bites because interacting with him will only reinforce the biting/scratching behavior.

The kitten should have a refuge away from everyone. Tall cat trees that are off-limits to everyone but the kitten should be placed in the rooms where the kitten likes to hang out. Everyone in the family needs to treat the cat trees as special kitten's sacred spaces, not to be violated.

Every effort should be made by all family members in helping the kitten feel safe and secure.

Both kittens need to be neutered. Neutering will help calm them down.