

My Kitten Has a Bad Biting Habit

CatChannel behavior expert Marilyn Krieger gives advice on how to redirect kitten's actions through behavior modification.

By Marilyn Krieger

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Q: I have a 7-month-old American Shorthair who has developed a terrible biting habit. He bites me during play and other times. I have tried squirting him with a water bottle, but I can't have it with me all the time. He is an indoor cat. I inadvertently started playing with him as a 6-week-old kitten with my hands instead of using toys on sticks. Help! I am seriously considering giving him away or making him an outdoor cat. My arms are covered in scars from the bites.

A: Your youngster is having boundary issues that were originally caused by being removed too early from his mom and siblings and/or being played with using hands instead of toys. Cats should stay with their mom and siblings until they are at least 12 weeks old so that they can learn acceptable boundaries and socialization skills through play and other interactions. Unfortunately, there are circumstances beyond our control where kittens are separated too early from their cat-family.

Using hands to play with kittens sends the wrong message. The kitten doesn't have a sense of boundaries. He doesn't understand why biting is encouraged in some activities, but discouraged for others.

Squirting your cat with water isn't the most effective or best way to change this behavior. A squirt of water might deter him in the moment, but won't permanently stop the behavior. Instead, you can retrain your cat through behavior modification and by changing the way you interact and play with him.

Start sending your message to him by giving your kitten time-outs whenever he bites or is about to bite. Cats usually warn us before they are about to bite. Watch his ears, eyes and body position. As soon as you are aware that your kitten intends to bite you, or if he is already biting you, give him a time-out. Stop interacting completely with him. Simply stop all discussions and disappear. These kinds of time-outs aren't long; usually a few minutes are all that are needed for time outs associated with play aggression.

Additionally, be aware of the circumstances that usually trigger him to bite. If he has a tendency to bite when he's overstimulated or excited, ease back on the intensity of the play. If you notice that he bites more at night or in the morning, then have scheduled play times during those times. And of course, don't use your hands when playing with him.

Use a pole toy that has a toy dangling on the end when playing with your kitten. The best technique to use is one that imitates the hunt. Pretend that the toy on the end of the pole is a little animal; make it scurry into bags, on top of sofas and beds and other places. When you are ready to stop playing, don't just end the game all of a sudden, instead gradually slow the play down. Make believe that the toy is a tired little animal, slowing down after a hard run from a predator. After a few minutes of gradually slowing the play down, finally let your youngster catch the toy one last time and then immediately give him something he loves to eat. It can be his regular meals or an especially delicious treat. He will eat, groom and then go to sleep. Make sure to play with him in this way multiple times during the day. Don't leave the fishing pole toy out when you are not supervising him with it. He could wrap himself up in it and get hurt. This effective play/hunt technique was first brought to my attention by Pam Johnson-Bennett, a certified animal behavior consultant.

With a little work and patience you will find your cat will gradually stop biting and can happily remain an indoor cat.