

My Kitten Has Become Mean

CatChannel behavior expert Marilyn Krieger, CCBC, offers advice on dealing with play-aggression in kittens.

By Marilyn Krieger

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Q: I have a 12-week-old kitten. He has gotten to the point that he is mean. He bites, claws and scratches very hard. I am scared that he will hurt the grand babies. What do I do to keep this under control?

A: There are many types and causes of aggression, but one of the most common we see in kittens is play-aggression. Without more information, my answer will be based on the assumption that your kitten has a challenge with play-aggression.

Your little kitten's aggression might be triggered by his having been removed too early from his mom and siblings and/or being played with using hands instead of toys. It is recommended that kittens stay with their siblings and mother until they are at least 12 weeks old so they learn important socialization skills and boundaries from playing and interacting with their litter mates and their mom. Using hands when playing with kittens and cats can result in them not recognizing what is acceptable or not acceptable in play.

You can retrain your kitten by gently teaching him the meaning of boundaries. Start by never using your hands when playing with him. Using hands when playing with kittens usually results in the kitties not recognizing limits. They don't understand why it's sometimes OK to bite and play with hands and other times it is off limits. Instead of using hands when playing, play with the kitten using toys like fishing pole toys, little safe balls and other interactive toys.

Pam Johnson-Bennett, a certified animal behavior consultant, suggests playing with cats in a way that imitates the hunt. Use a fishing pole toy, making the toy scurry into bags, under sofas, over chairs, etc. Since your kitten has lots of energy, the play sessions can be long. When you are ready to stop playing, don't just end the game, instead gradually slow the play down. Pretend that the toy at the end of the pole is a little animal who is getting very tired. Finally, let the kitten catch the toy one last time and then immediately give him something really yummy to eat. He will eat, groom and then go to sleep. Play with him multiple times during the day this way. 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.

When he does bite or scratch, give him a time out by immediately stopping all interaction with him and leaving the room. Simply stop all discussions and disappear. Time outs aren't long; usually a few minutes are all that are needed when working with play-aggression. After the kitten has calmed down, you can start gently petting or playing with him again. At the first sign of biting or scratching, again stop interacting with him and give him another time out. He will soon learn that his biting and scratching will result in not having someone to interact with.

Additionally, I recommend counseling the grandchildren to play gently with the kitten and to start recognizing the kitten's body language. If the kitten doesn't want to be picked up or petted, then they should respect his wishes. Also, consider providing the kitten with safe places to go, such as tall cat trees and shelves that are off-limits to the grandchildren.