

# Boroughbred Behavior Resources



## Issue: Rough Play (Play Aggression)

Play aggression is the most common type of aggressive behavior experienced by cat owners. Playing is a normal part of all young cats' behavior; it allows them to exercise, develop physical coordination, and improve their problem-solving skills. Playing helps them practice stalking, pouncing, leaping, chasing, batting, swatting, grabbing and biting, which are all skills normally needed for survival. Although the intentions of your cat is to solicit play, the fun gets taken out of the equation when playful bites, scratches and pounces become rough and cause injuries.

Before you decide that your cat's behavior is play aggression, be sure to rule out other potential causes like fear, illness, pain, and more. Pay close attention to the circumstances leading up to the aggression and your cat's body language to help you determine what type of aggression is being displayed. It's always a good idea to check with your veterinarian and rule out if the aggression is stemming from a possible medical condition.

### Why do some cats play rough?

There are several ways cats can develop play aggression, however the severity of play aggression varies with each cat. Rough play can develop with kittens who've been weaned or orphaned too early. Kittens learn social cues and develop healthy play skills and bite inhibition when playing with littermates and with their mom, so when they miss this learning opportunity they can develop play habits that include more rambunctious biting and scratching. Play aggression can also develop with kittens who've been encouraged to play with human hands and feet. It's adorable when the kitten is cute and small, however the cuteness fades away when the kitten becomes a larger, stronger, juvenile or adult cat who has been taught that it's okay to rough house with human body parts. Boredom from being left alone for long hours without opportunities to expend their excess energy can also result in play aggression.

### Some things to avoid to prevent playful aggression:

- Don't punish your cat by yelling, hitting, or shoving the cat away from you when they display play aggression. Physical punishment can increase a cat's reactivity and may make them become defensive, causing the play aggression to become more severe. You also don't want to damage the bond between you and your cat by causing them to become fearful of you.
- Never use your hands as toys. All it does it teach the kitty that biting and grabbing on human body parts is acceptable. You should also never wrestle with your cat. We're much bigger than them, so wrestling will only make them go on the defense. Use hands to show affection, never for rough housing.
- Don't pull away if your hand ends up in your cat's mouth. Pulling your hand away mimics prey-like movement and will tempt your cat to bite down harder. If you gently push your hand toward the cat's mouth, it'll confuse them temporarily and will cause them to loosen the hold for a moment. When they let go, end the interaction immediately and walk away. You want to teach them that biting or scratching will only result in the end of playtime.

### Positive Steps to Stop Play Aggression:

- Toys, toys, toys! Offer a variety of toys to encourage play when they're on their own. Most cats enjoy furry mice toys, lightweight jingle balls, or even crinkled pieces of paper. Place them strategically around your home (poking out from behind a door, at the end of the cat tree perch, or inside of a paper bag) to encourage your cat to carry out their regular hunting behaviors. You can also toss them to encourage chasing, but never hold these toys in your hand while playing. The cat will want to grab the toy from you, which may unintentionally cause injury to your hand. If your cat isn't interested in these toys, try marinating them in catnip or silver vine. They're used as a natural mood enhancer, typically causing cats to become more affectionate or active, which can attract the cat to play with the toy.
- Invest in a wand-type toy (also known as a fishing rod toy). These toys typically have a stick with a string and feathers or toy attached at the end. This toy allows for vigorous, stimulating exercise while keeping human hands at a safe distance. Make the toy go behind objects to perk your cat's interest, play hide-n-seek, or wave it in the air! You're in control! Pay attention to your cat's preferences during playtime; they may enjoy leaping in the air as the toy flies around or find it irresistible to chase when it's low on the ground. Be sure to try to mimic prey-like movements to lure your cat to take the pounce. This toy allows the cat to stalk, ambush, tackle, and bunny kick, all of which are normal cat hunting behavior. Instituting regular sessions of play therapy will strengthen the bond with you and your cat. When a cat is able to stalk, capture, and kill (the toy), they relieve stress and feel more confident, and you'll be glad they're not aiming for your hands!

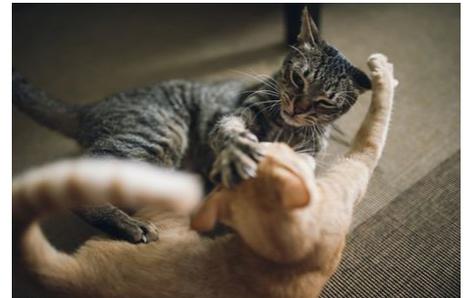
- During interactive play, make sure you're allowing several successful captures to encourage satisfaction. Laser pointers are great, but cats may feel frustrated if they cannot capture something physical. To avoid building feelings of frustration, you can toss them a physical toy or give them opportunities to pounce on the wand toy to wrestle and bunny kick. Abruptly ending playtime may leave the cat wanting more and won't help your cat settle down.
- After a play session, food is a great way to reward your cat for a job well done. A puzzle feeder is a great way to keep your cat engaged; it exercises their brain in addition to their body. If your cat tends to inhale their food, puzzle feeders can also help slow their eating habits and support a healthier eating pace. If you don't want to purchase one, this link: <https://www.purina.com/articles/cat/feeding/diy-cat-puzzle-feeder> offers various ways to make puzzle feeders from everyday home items.
- Figure out when your cats seems to be the most active and plan your play sessions. If your cat tends to be more active late in the night, schedule a rigorous play session right before you head to bed. A cat's normal routine is to hunt and kill (play), eat, groom, and then sleep. Your goal is to get all their energy out and offer them a nice meal, so they're ready to rest when you are. Most cat owners typically plan a play session in the morning before work or school, and then another session in the evening before bed.
- Provide more environmental enrichment so your cat isn't bored when they're left alone. Cats need stimulation and opportunities to discover. Increase vertical space in the home with cat trees and shelving. Adding vertical territory will create opportunities for playing, climbing, and jumping. Encourage your cat to explore by creating a trail of treats or placing toys in different areas in the home so they have a new place to explore every day to get a tasty and/or fun surprise. Hanging a bird feeder by a comfortable window perch can provide your cat with hours of entertainment (aka cat TV).
- Re-direct your cat's energy onto appropriate outlets if your cat tends to hide behind objects and pounce on ankles while you walk. Carry some small toys in your pocket to toss them in another direction to avoid getting ambushed.
- Consider adopting another cat if you feel your cat may be lonely, especially if you're away long hours at a time. Cats are social creatures, so having another cat may help keep them busy at home. Just be sure to introduce them slowly and gradually over time to assure their first experiences and long-lasting impressions with each other are positive.



See our “**Environmental Enrichment**” flyer for more information on toys, puzzle feeders, and other types of enrichment for your home.

### What if my cat is Play Aggressive to another Cat?

- Set up safe zones so each cat has a place to withdraw if the playing becomes too rough, especially if one of the cats is showing signs of fear. Vertical space, shelving walkways, perches and tunnels will provide cats with a place to retreat and a sense of safety.
- Conduct individual and group play sessions with both cats. Playing will help relieve excess energy for each cat and can help both cats build a positive association with one another. When conducting group play sessions, be sure they each have a toy to play with so they don't butt heads and they each get action time. If possible, bring in another family member to help with group play sessions.
- Puzzle feeders will keep both cats busy and give them a break from focusing on each other. Again, make sure they each have one available to them so they aren't competing for goodies!
- Re-direct! When play time starts to go sour, distract both cats by tossing toys or treats. This breaks up the tension with something positive. If one cat seems to have more energy than the other, re-direct that cat using a wand-type toy to give the other cat a reprieve.
- If the play becomes too aggressive where one or both start to hiss, growl, or vocalize loudly, consider separating both cats and re-introducing them. If they've had consistent negative experiences with one another, separating and re-introducing them will help ease your cats back into co-habitation and restart on the right foot.



See our “**Reintroducing Cats**” flyer for more information on this topic.

### For more information:

International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants: <https://m.iaabc.org/>

Certified Applied Animal Behaviorists: <http://corecaab.org/>