



Pediatric Behavior Problems—Cats

Basics

OVERVIEW

- Undesirable behaviors exhibited by kittens between birth and puberty
- May include biting; scratching; excessive or destructive play, or both; fear and defensive behaviors

GENETICS

- Paternal influence for friendliness to people; paternal influence is that of the tomcat (that is, the father cat)

SIGNALMENT/DESCRIPTION OF PET

Species

- Cats

Breed Predilections

- None

Mean Age and Range

- Generally 8–12 weeks

Predominant Sex

- None

SIGNS/OBSERVED CHANGES IN THE PET

- Most common behavior problems of kittens are related to play, fearfulness, defensive aggression, and elimination
- Play is composed of components of other behaviors, often hunting or predatory behavior and fighting between cats; play can be solitary, with objects, or social (that is, with other kittens or cats; if another kitten is not available, another animal or person)
- During normal play, bites are inhibited and claws not extended fully
- Fear and defensive behaviors include hiding, fleeing, and aggression
- Fear/defensive aggression often is characterized by flattened ears, hissing, and dilated pupils

Aggressive Play Directed toward People or Other Pets in the Household

- Unsolicited attacks by kitten directed toward people or other pets in the household
- Contains elements of predatory and cat-to-cat aggression, such as stalking, chasing, attacking, pouncing,

swatting, and biting

- Ambushes are common and occur without the kitten making sounds (vocalizations)
- Bites generally are inhibited but may indent the skin; light scratches with claws may occur—if person's skin is soft or fragile, the wounds may break the skin

Uninhibited Aggressive Play Directed toward People

- Signs similar to normal aggressive play, except more intense
- Bites are not as inhibited and usually break the person's skin

Excessive and/or Destructive Play

- High level of solitary play that often results in household-item damage; may interrupt the owner's sleep

Normal Play Directed toward Objects in the Household

- Bursts of solitary play that include intense running across household furnishings
- Knocks over or swipes objects from horizontal surfaces

Fearful Behaviors

- Hiding, hissing, scratching, unsocial behaviors

Fear and Defensive Behaviors Due to Lack of Early Experience

- No exposure to people for the kitten between 3 and 7 weeks of age
- Behaviors associated with fear (such as dilated pupils, hair standing up, especially over the back and tail [known as “piloerection”], defensive postures, hissing, hiding, fleeing, aggression in the presence of people)

Fear and Defensive Behaviors Related to Early Trauma

- Normal behavior until experienced a traumatic event, such as abuse or attack by another animal

Fear and Defensive Behaviors Related to Correction Technique

- Employ behavior modification techniques, as described previously

Scratching

- Using claws to scratch on surfaces that may include household items and people
- Scratching is a normal behavior for claw maintenance and as a form of territorial marking
- This normal behavior becomes problematic for the pet owner when scratched objects include walls, furniture, carpets, window drapes, and other household items
- Evidence of scratched items in the household or scratch injuries to family members

CAUSES

Aggressive Play Directed toward People or Other Cats in the Household

- Normal cat or species-typical behavior, but without appropriate social interaction, behavior can become uninhibited and potentially cause injuries
- Owners may encourage inappropriate interactive play by promoting play with human body parts, such as fingers, hands, and feet
- Lack of other outlets for more appropriate play

Normal Play Directed toward Objects in the Household

- Normal cat or species-typical behavior

Fear and Defensive Behaviors Due to Lack of Early Experience

- No or minimal exposure to people when the kitten is between 3 and 7 weeks of age

Fear and Defensive Behaviors Related to Early Trauma

- Early traumatic event, such as abuse or attack by another animal

Fear and Defensive Behaviors Related to Correction Technique

- “Correction” by a person, such as being spanked, hit on the nose, yelled at, or chased

RISK FACTORS

Aggressive Play Directed toward People

- The only young cat in the household; orphan, hand-reared kitten
- No appropriate outlets provided for normal play and exploration

Normal Play Directed toward Objects in the Household

- Lack of environmental stimuli
- Lack of available toys
- Little interactive play with people or other pets

- Only kitten or pet in household

Fear and Defensive Behaviors

- Lack of appropriate socialization with people, correction techniques, and other traumatic experience(s)

Scratching

- Lack of appropriate scratching materials

Treatment

HEALTH CARE

- Outpatient

ACTIVITY

- Many pediatric behavior problems can be alleviated or reduced by enriching the kitten's environment (such as providing movable toys; having a variety of toys and rotating toys regularly; engaging in interactive play; allowing the kitten access to windows; providing boxes, paper bags to play in and around; offer a variety of scratching surfaces; possibly provide a second kitten with which to play)

DIET

- Nutrition undoubtedly influences development of nervous system and behavior, but specifics unclear
- Premium prenatal diet for the mother cat (queen) and premium kitten diets

Medications

- None needed, unless fear and anxiety are extreme

Follow-Up Care

PATIENT MONITORING

- Follow-up appointments as recommended by your pet's veterinarian
- Telephone follow-up support is helpful and is recommended at 2, 4, and 8 weeks following initial discussion about the kitten's behavior problems with your pet's veterinarian

PREVENTIONS AND AVOIDANCE

- Kitten behavior problems are a result of the owner's unrealistic expectations and misunderstanding of normal kitten behavior
- Most problems can be prevented or redirected
- Kittens should experience positive interactions with people between 3 and 7 weeks of age to reduce behaviors related to fear of people and to develop appropriate social bonds to people
- Exposure to tolerant and playful kittens and cats when the kitten is between 4 and 18 weeks of age is helpful so the kitten learns effective bite and play inhibition
- Family members should avoid any roughhouse play with kittens and any play involving human body parts (such as fingers or feet)
- Punishment may result in fear, anxiety, and defensive aggression in the kitten; avoid punishment of the kitten
- Behavior education (including advice from the veterinarian, pamphlets, videos, or books) at routine office visits or special kitten appointments

POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

- Defensive or aggressive behavior in the kitten or adult cat
- Injury to other pets or people
- A weakened bond with the pet and possible relinquishment to a shelter

EXPECTED COURSE AND PROGNOSIS

Normal Play Behaviors Directed toward People, Other Cats, and Household Objects

- Appropriately followed treatment protocols should result in reduction or resolution of problem; if behavior not resolving, follow-up appointment is needed
- Many of these behaviors begin to wane as the kitten ages

Uninhibited Aggressive Play Directed toward People

- Guarded prognosis as many of these kittens mature and their aggression becomes more severe and likely to cause injury to the person
- Better prognosis for those kittens in which the uninhibited aggression is caught and treated early

Scratching

- Generally, the prognosis is good, if the kitten is diverted successfully and rewarded for using appropriate scratching surfaces and as the kitten matures and the behaviors wane
- Long-term management may be needed for the occasional, individual cat with a high drive to scratch

Fear and Defensive Behaviors Due to Lack of Early Experience or Related to Early Trauma

- It may take months, or even years, to acclimate the kitten to people; kittens will vary in the degree to which they acclimate; some kittens may never be comfortable around people
- The longer the interval between 3 weeks of age and lack of exposure to people, the poorer the prognosis
- The more intense the early trauma, the poorer the prognosis

Fear and Defensive Behaviors Related to Correction Techniques

- Can resolve quickly, if corrections have not been used frequently, they have not been severe, and the clients follow advice
- Use more appropriate reward-based, avoidance, and redirected procedures to replace punishment techniques

Key Points

- Most of these problems are normal kitten behaviors that the owner perceives as abnormal or excess and inappropriate for his or her lifestyle

AGGRESSIVE PLAY DIRECTED TOWARD PEOPLE

- The most effective treatment is to acquire an additional kitten of the same size and temperament; the kittens will play with each other
- Provide and encourage plenty of regular exercise and interactive play
- Identify circumstances or situations in which the attacks may occur and be prepared to redirect the play to another object (such as tossing a wadded piece of paper or other cat toy for the kitten to stalk, chase, pounce, and grab)
- Do not use physical corrections or punishments; do not hit, kick, or snap kitten on nose with fingers
- Can use a startling stimulus (such as a squirt from a water gun or bottle, hissing from a compressed air can) as a punisher—such a stimulus will not work unless it is used every time the kitten attacks
- Stop play with the kitten for inappropriate behaviors; may use a startling noise or hiss to distract the kitten and then stop play by withdrawing from the kitten and ignoring it
- Frequent trimming of tips of claws helps reduce damage

AGGRESSIVE PLAY DIRECTED TOWARD OTHER CATS IN THE HOUSEHOLD

- Acquire an additional kitten of the same size and temperament of the problem kitten
- If acquiring another kitten is not an option, the problem kitten and older cat should have restricted access to each other
- Startling, punitive techniques likely would affect the older cat aversively
- Interactive play with kitten on a regular, daily basis, using toys or objects

UNINHIBITED AGGRESSIVE PLAY DIRECTED TOWARD PEOPLE

- Treatments would be similar to those used for normal aggressive play
- Placing the kitten in a “work-to-earn” program, in which it must respond to the owner in a command-response-reward format, is helpful
- Declawing is an option, although controversy exists about the humaneness of this procedure; several studies indicate that declawing is not psychologically harmful to cats—declawing may be preferable to relinquishment of the kitten to animal control or an animal shelter
- Put valuable, breakable, or dangerous objects away
- Provide appropriate toys for kitten
- Interactive play with kitten using toys or objects on a regular and daily basis

- “Booby traps” or self-activated punishers might be used to keep kitten away from a few select objects or areas
- Provide scratching posts of variable surfaces; ensure they are long enough for the cat to stretch and scratch
- Frequent trimming of tips of claws or use of nail caps (such as Soft Claws) applied to claws
- Declawing is an option; although controversy exists about the humaneness of this procedure, several studies indicate that declawing is not psychologically harmful to cats—declawing may be preferable to relinquishment of the kitten to animal control or an animal shelter

FEAR AND DEFENSIVE BEHAVIORS DUE TO LACK OF EARLY EXPERIENCE OR FROM EARLY TRAUMA

- Gradual exposure to people without forcing any interactions
- In general, the kitten should be housed where it is comfortable, can remove itself from view but be continuously/very frequently aware of people
- Generally counter-conditioning is required—initially, food can be put in or near the hiding area; gradually the food is placed farther from the hiding area and closer to where a person is stationary; no attempt should be made to grab the kitten; the food can be left progressively farther from the hiding place while people engage in their normal activities and the food eventually may be placed on a person's lap
- Toys on strings can be used to entice the kitten to play; eventually the kitten may accept stroking, then holding
- Important principles to remember are to let the kitten make the advances—not the person—and avoid scaring the kitten

FEAR AND DEFENSIVE BEHAVIORS RELATED TO CORRECTION TECHNIQUES

- Identify and cease inappropriate punitive behaviors of people
- Identify the stimuli that elicit the fearful and/or defensive behaviors
- Employ behavior modification techniques, as described previously

Notes

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