

All About Pets

The national pet care information service



AGGRESSIVE CATS



THE BLUE CROSS

Britain's pet charity

There are many different types of aggression exhibited by animals, and cats are no exception. We are happy to accept many forms of aggression as normal behaviour – such as our own cat chasing a strange cat out of the garden or a female cat with kittens pushing away intruders. We even accept cats which scratch or bite us, provided we feel they have been provoked enough to retaliate!



Grabbing the hand which strokes

One of the most common 'aggression' problems is known as 'petting and biting syndrome' – when you start to stroke a cat it turns around and bites you or attacks your hand. So why do cats do it?

Think of the cat sitting on your lap and being stroked. It has to be very relaxed and trusting to put itself in that position – like a kitten being groomed by its mother. For some cats this is just a little too dangerous, they relax and then suddenly feel vulnerable. Accepting stroking is a learned response rather than a natural adult behaviour and some cats may just be more naturally reactive than others.

You need to help your cat feel more secure with physical attention. Sit quietly with the cat when you won't be interrupted and keep everything very calm. Keep interactions short and stop before the cat reacts.

Aggression in hand-reared kittens

Aggression can also be a problem in some hand-reared animals if their behaviours are interrupted or frustrated. Just as our children must learn to do as they are told, to be able to cope when they cannot get their own way and to fit in with our social rules, mothers will teach their kittens the feline equivalent. The solution is to reward the behaviour you want with attention and food and to ignore or prevent situations when aggression comes into play.

Aggression between cats can be a problem when new cats are introduced in a household. Time, patience and careful introductions can tackle this. Sometimes even cats that have lived alongside each other for years will have a breakdown in their relationship and begin to fight. If there is an external factor such as a new cat in the household that has upset the balance, you may be able to resolve the situation. For more detailed advice, see our leaflet *Introducing your cat to the family*.





Body talk

Whatever your pet's background or breeding you can tell a lot about its mental and physical state by learning to recognise common vocal and visual signals. Facial expressions and body postures reflect a cat's mood. An alert cat will have its ears up and forward, while its nostrils and whiskers twitch as it uses its senses of sight, smell, sound and touch to investigate its surroundings. An aggressive cat will grow in size as it arches its back and draws itself to full height. Its hairs stand on end and its tail fluffs up like a bottlebrush. You'll notice its eyes are wide open, with ears flat against the head for protection in anticipation of an attack. An attacking cat, or a very confident animal, may also open its mouth wide to expose its teeth. In contrast, a cat that's feeling defensive will seem smaller – crouching and flattening its body. It may avert its gaze in an attempt to avoid conflict.

Cats have mobile tails to aid balance and express emotions. A cat that runs towards you with its tail held upright is saying 'good to see you'. But steer clear of a tail with a twitchy tip – this is a warning the cat's feeling threatened or is in predatory mode.

Remember

If you are having persistent problems of aggression of any type with your cat, especially if targeted towards people or children, you may wish to talk to The Blue Cross or your vet about referral to a feline behaviourist.

Further information

For further information and advice on caring for your pet or horse visit www.allaboutpets.org.uk, the national pet care information service. Alternatively, you can write to us at the address below to request a list of available leaflets.

All About Pets is provided by The Blue Cross, Britain's pet charity. We rely entirely on your support to enable us to continue our vital work. Any contribution would be most welcome. Thank you.



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