

Kitten biting, nipping and rough play



Reprinted with permission from AZ Humane

Revised 1/2024

Biting and using her claws are normal and natural behaviors for a kitten. You will need to show your kitten what she can bite and use her claws on (i.e. her toys, scratching post, etc.) and you also need ensure that she has bite inhibition. Bite inhibition means your kitten uses her mouth and claws softly and without pressure when interacting with people. In other words, when your kitten bites you or uses her claws on you – it shouldn't hurt you and it shouldn't break your skin or make you bleed.

Kittens learn fighting and biting behavior from encounters with their littermates or mothers. They grab each other in mock battles but do not inflict injury. A young kitten will pounce, chase, stalk, wrestle, bite and scratch her siblings and mother. If a kitten gets too aggressive with her sibling, the sibling will usually correct the aggression with a growl, retaliation or she will simply stop playing because she is hurt. The kitten's mother also warns her if she becomes too aggressive, often with a growl or a swat. Kittens continually give each other signals to indicate that the interaction is meant as play and not as aggression. Through her rough-and-tumble play, she learns to sheath her claws and not to sink her teeth into another cat, thus inhibiting over-aggressive behavior.

If you find yourself with a kitten who tends to bite and use her claws harder than she should:

Remove – Kittens love play. Abruptly ending a play session is a powerful message for your kitten. When your kitten bites on you too hard say, "Ouch" in calm voice and walk away from her. Count to 10 and return. If she continues to bite, pounce on or scratch you as you walk away, put yourself behind a closed door and re-engage with her when she is calmer.

Redirect – Redirect your kitten's mouth and claws away from your hands by using long-distance cat-safe toys to play with her. Using feather wands, laser pointers and other fetch & chase toys gives your kitten a chance to use her instincts while keeping your hands and arms safe.

Reinforce – Reinforce your kitten with a treat, pet or additional play when she uses her mouth or claws appropriately and without pressure.

Repeat – Cats, like people, learn through repetition. You must say, "Ouch" and walk away from her each time she bites or uses her claws too hard. If you are consistent, she will quickly learn that when she bites or claws too hard the good thing (i.e. you) goes away. Remember to also reward her each time she uses her mouth or claws appropriately.

Play

Cats are predators. Even though you provide your cat with all her meals, her instinct to hunt still exists. It is normal for cats to continually practice and fine-tune their hunting skills. Therefore, it is essential that you provide an outlet for this behavior or your cat will practice on you. Play should be an interactive game between you and your cat. Kittens should get at least four (4), fifteen (15) minute play sessions a day and adult cats should get at least two (2), fifteen (15) minute play sessions a day.

A Cautionary Note About Squirt Bottles

Squirting kittens with water for biting and clawing due to play aggression is not very effective in most cases. It may stop your kitten momentarily, but it does not teach her what to do instead when the play aggressive mood strikes. You will likely just wind up with a wet, frustrated kitten. Some kittens may think of it as a game, trying to dodge the water or even to “catch” the water stream. For a kitten in the “I need to play” mode, dodging water squirts may become something she accepts as a kind of play with you (and that is better than no play at all).

The bigger principle here is working with the way cats learn and using positive reinforcement rather than punishment. When you spray a cat with water after exhibiting a behavior you don't like, you're assuming the cat connects the water with the unwanted behavior. The cat doesn't make that connection so the water spray is more likely to damage your relationship with your cat, who sees the water being sprayed as unpredictable, which translates as you being unpredictable. Using aversive methods like squirt bottles and loud noises are more likely to damage your relationship with your cat than they are to produce the behavior change you're looking for.