



# Cat Behaviour Guide

## Human-Directed Aggression in Cats



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Cats may do many things that we find confusing, but it can be especially hard to understand when they show aggression towards family members. This guide will explain why some cats might bite or scratch people and offer suggestions to help prevent or respond to these situations. By learning more about your cat's needs and emotions, you can help make your home safer and calmer for everyone.

### Why Do Cats Bite or Scratch People?

Cats may bite or scratch for many reasons, such as feeling scared, painful, sick, stressed, frustrated or overstimulated. Some cats may even learn to bite as a way to communicate, especially if they discover that it's the quickest way to get attention or if they haven't been taught how to play gently. Often, when a cat shows aggression towards humans, it's because their attempts to communicate are misunderstood. You can help prevent this by learning how to recognize and respond to your cat's body language.

Every behaviour happens for a reason and is motivated by the emotions the cat is feeling. For more general information about aggression in cats, check out our "Aggressive Behaviour in Cats" guide.

### My Cat is Showing Aggression... Now What?

One of the best ways to help a cat who may respond aggressively is to lower their stress. Stress is a natural response to challenges, and while a little stress is normal, high levels of stress for long periods of time can lead to health problems and unwanted behaviour, like aggression. Reducing stress can help your cat live a longer, healthier and happier life.

Here are some steps you can take to help lower your cat's stress:

#### **Routine Wellness Checks**

Regular check-ups with your veterinarian are important for your cat's health. Your vet can spot common health problems, like dental disease, that might cause pain and lead to aggression. If you notice any changes in your cat's behaviour, especially if aggression is new or getting worse, visiting your vet should be a first step to rule out any health issues.

#### **Meeting Your Cat's Needs**

Creating a secure environment is essential for reducing stress and preventing unwanted behaviours. All cats need the following five things in their environment to feel safe:

1. **A Safe Place:** Give your cat quiet, secure spots to hide, like boxes, beds, cat trees or high shelves. Avoid disturbing them in these spaces as they may be seeking solitude.
2. **Multiple, Separated Resources:** Cats need their own food bowls, water dishes, scratching posts, beds and litter boxes. Having multiple options helps reduce stress, even if you only have one cat. If you have more than one cat, providing more resources is necessary to minimize conflict.



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3. **Daily Playtime:** Provide daily play and activities that allow your cat to exercise their mind and body. This helps prevent boredom and frustration while allowing them to express natural behaviours like chasing, stalking and pouncing.
4. **Consistent and Predictable Interactions:** Be a reliable, safe presence for your cat. Stick to a consistent schedule for feeding, playtime and cleaning litterboxes. Do not use punishment, and avoid doing things that scare or upset them.
5. **Respect Their Senses:** Avoid strong smells from items such as candles, air fresheners, cleaning products or perfumes. You can also use synthetic pheromones, like Feliway, to help calm your cat. Provide scratching posts so your cat can scent mark by scratching, which will help them feel more secure and prevent damage to your furniture.

### Learn Your Cat's Body Language

Learning your cat's body language and responding to their signals can prevent stress and aggression. Cats have the right to say "no", and it's important to respect their boundaries. For more details, please refer to our "Petting Etiquette - The Cat Consent Test" handout on the EHS website.

### Positive Reinforcement Training

Training is a great way to build a stronger bond with your cat while providing mental and physical stimulation. It can also help your cat become more comfortable with necessary tasks, such as going into a carrier or getting their nails trimmed. Using positive reinforcement training can help your cat feel more relaxed and reduce aggression caused by fear or discomfort.

### Seek Help

If you're unsure how to handle your cat's behaviour, it's a good idea to get help from a qualified trainer or veterinary behaviourist. Consulting a professional will ensure you keep everyone safe and help to maintain a healthy, positive relationship with your cat.

## Emotional Motivations for Aggressive Behaviour

Cats experience a wide range of emotions that influence their behaviour. In addition to reducing stress, there are other ways to address aggression depending on the emotions behind their behaviour. Here are some of the most common reasons why cats may show aggression toward people.

Type	Causes	What It Looks Like	What To Do
<b>Fear-induced</b>	Feeling threatened, cornered or trapped. Influenced by genetics and early experiences. Triggered by	Hissing, growling, hiding, crouching, tense body, wide eyes, dilated pupils, fur	Give the cat space. Use non-threatening body language (take a step back, turn to



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	unfamiliar or unpredictable people, objects or situations.	standing up, ears pulled back and swatting.	the side, blink slowly, look away).
<b>Pain-induced</b>	Illness or injury can make a cat feel vulnerable and defensive, lowering their tolerance. Pain may not always be obvious.	Hiding, low activity, not grooming, avoiding jumping, hesitating on stairs, changes in eating or drinking, house soiling, aggression when touched.	Contact your vet if you notice changes in your cat's behaviour, eating habits, activity level or litter box use.
<b>Stress-induced</b>	Chronic illness or injury, lack of routine, instability, household conflict, fear or frustration can trigger stress.	Can appear unpredictable due to emotional triggers. May resemble fear- or pain-induced aggression.	Identify and prevent stressors, create a stable routine and discuss treatment options with your vet.
<b>Frustration</b>	When communication fails or is ignored. When a cat is prevented from accessing something they want or need. Boredom can contribute.	Meowing, rubbing against you, bringing toys and knocking things over. May escalate to biting. Trying to get somewhere and biting/scratching if picked up or held.	Play when your cat asks. Provide interactive toys and puzzle feeders. Teach a "come when called" cue to avoid picking them up to move them.
<b>Redirected Aggression</b>	Aggression directed at a person unrelated to the trigger due to frustration with an unreachable target.	Becoming agitated by something they can see but not reach, then biting or scratching a bystander. Some cats may remain upset for hours.	Prevent cat-cat conflict (e.g., block windows if outdoor cats are triggers). Never touch an upset cat and use a blanket or pillow to protect yourself. Provide a safe space for your cat to calm down.
<b>Learned Aggression</b>	Cats learn that aggression is the fastest way to communicate. If biting stops an unwanted interaction, cats may skip warning signals in the future.	May seem like biting or scratching "without warning" because the cat has learned their discomfort signals don't work.	Never push your cat to the point where they feel aggression is their only option. Avoid handling your cat in ways they dislike.
<b>Petting Related Aggression</b>	Some cats do not enjoy petting or prefer to be touched in specific areas by familiar people, or only at certain times (not when sleeping or playing). Some cats have	Ears moving back, dilated pupils, looking at hand, lip/nose licking, tail twitching, freezing, skin 'rippling' or warning bite.	Use a Consent Test. Pet your cat in areas they enjoy. Don't pet sleeping or playing cats. Stop when they show signs of discomfort. Be cautious with unfamiliar cats.



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	sensitive skin and petting can feel painful.		
<b>Misdirected Play</b>	Not true aggression but can turn into fear or frustration if punished. Often seen in kittens without playmates or cats not taught safe play. May indicate boredom.	Play behaviours such as chasing, stalking, pouncing, biting and grabbing with claws.	Never play using hands or feet. Don't yelp or pull away, as it can trigger a cat's instinct to bite. Freeze, withdraw attention briefly, then redirect to a toy.

By understanding the emotions that motivate aggressive behaviour, you can take action to reduce stress and prevent triggers. This helps improve your relationship with your cat and keeps everyone safe.

### Additional Resources:

For more information, visit our website: <https://www.edmontonhumanesociety.com/education/resources-for-pet-guardians/>

### Did You Know?

You can also ask us behavioural questions by emailing: [askthespecialist@edmontonhumanesociety.com](mailto:askthespecialist@edmontonhumanesociety.com)

The majority of funding to keep the Edmonton Humane Society operational each year comes from the generous donations of supporters like you. Your kindness helps us continue our work, providing care and a better for animals in need. [Donate today.](#)