

CAT 19

# Nervous and aggressive cats



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## **Nervous and aggressive cats**

*When taken home as a pet, a cat or kitten may be quiet and wary for the first few days, or even weeks, whilst getting used to you and the new environment.*

## Nervous cats

However, some cats remain fearful despite a gentle welcome and time to settle in. This can cause their owners great anxiety because they feel that the cat is not happy. The cat may run and hide as soon as someone comes to the house, if there is a sudden noise, or from common everyday sounds such as the television.

A nervous or frightened cat needs a quiet and understanding household. If it is a busy and noisy one, the owners will probably see little of the cat until the children have gone to bed and the adults have settled down quietly in front of the TV.

## There can be several causes of nervousness in cats

- Genetics – as with people, some cats seem to be more nervous than others
- Bad experiences – the cat may previously have had a frightening experience and survival mechanisms make the animal generally fearful in anticipation of it happening again
- Lack of experience at a crucial time in development – kittens that meet people and other animals and are exposed to the general hubbub of life by the time they are eight weeks old will take almost anything in their stride. This is the making of a confident cat. If the cat has missed out on these early experiences, life with humans can be difficult to cope with.

Hence, knowing a cat's background can make a difference in determining whether you can help or not. However, for many owners this is impossible as they have no idea what happened before they took the cat on. They have to try to tackle the problem but it is not something that can be solved overnight, if at all. It takes patience and time.

Consider a cat that hides under the bed at the slightest noise or activity within the house. The cat has moved away from what is seen as a life-threatening situation, and feels a flood of relief. This feeling is strong and reinforces "flight" behaviour – after all, the cat thinks that doing this is a life-saving act. Owners must be able to offer something more rewarding than the feeling of safety the cat gets by following their instincts – this can be difficult.

The cat must learn that there is nothing threatening in the situation that they are running from.



It can be useful to obtain an indoor crate or kittening pen for the cat's re-education. Place it in the corner of the room and cover with a blanket so that the cat can see out of the front but as the sides remain covered the cat feels somewhat protected. Place the cat in the pen during a quiet period initially, so that the cat can get used to it and relax. The cat will probably like the feeling of protection the pen provides. Feed your cat favourite treats in the pen and provide a litter tray. Let the cat view all normal household goings-on from this safe haven and gradually add more "action".

When the cat seems relaxed, ask a friend to visit. Normally the cat would run away when the doorbell rings, but now the cat has to watch and listen, albeit from the safety of the pen. Ask your guest to feed the cat through the cage with a special tit-bit and talk soothingly.

You can then graduate to having the cat in the room without the pen and inviting visitors in. As the cat learns that everything is not a threat, they also discover that the rewards of staying around are indeed worth overcoming the fear. Never lose your temper or become impatient with your cat – this will just reinforce the cat's previous fears.

Remember, cats feel safe in high places, therefore when you progress to letting the cat out of the pen, provide a high perch for your cat to sit on safely.

## Aggressive cats

Animals exhibit many different types of aggression 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 that scratch or bite us, provided we feel that they have been provoked enough to retaliate! Aggression towards people is not a common problem with cats and even when it does occur, it seldom causes serious injury.

## Grabbing the hand that strokes

One of the most common aggression problems is known as "petting and biting syndrome" – when you start to stroke your cat, the animal turns round and bites you or attacks your hand. Some cats only attack in this way if their tummy is being tickled, but others only need to be stroked on the head before they retaliate.

Think of a cat sitting on your lap and being stroked – the cat has to be relaxed and trusting to be in this position. This is similar to a kitten being groomed by a mother. For some cats this feels just a little too dangerous – they relax and



then suddenly feel vulnerable. With conflicting feelings of security and fear, they react with defensive aggression and grab the hand stroking them.

The acceptance of stroking is a learned response rather than natural adult behaviour and some cats may just be more naturally reactive than others. They may calm down as they get older since young cats, like children, are easily excited. Others may have missed out on human attention at that vital time in their social development (before eight weeks old) and find it impossible to accept physical attention.

Sit quietly with your cat at a time when you will not be interrupted and keep everything calm. Keep interaction short and stop before the cat reacts. Try not to provoke a reaction – stop stroking when you notice twitching or backward-facing ears, dilated pupils or sudden tensing. Reward your cat with food and praise for behaving in a relaxed way. Never punish the cat – this only reinforces the idea that you are a threatening person.

## **Pent-up energies**

Occasionally cats go beyond reactive aggression into proactive aggression, attacking their owners as they walk past. Quite often these problems occur in indoor cats and may be a form of predatory behaviour or redirected aggression.



Cats watch birds or other cats through the window and become excited. However, they have no outlet for this pent-up energy or frustration. If their owner happens to be walking past, the movement triggers them into the hunting or redirected aggression mode and they attack. Owners of such cats may want to try to help them to use up some of this energy and allow them to fulfil their hunting repertoire – especially if they are indoor-only cats.

This can be done by providing new toys and objects to climb and play on. By playing hunting games with toys on the end of string and by teaching the cat to find food around the house rather than just presenting it in a bowl, you will be encouraging your cat's natural behaviour.

## Playing too hard

Many kittens and young cats get overexcited when they are playing and may attack hands and feet. When kittens are small, owners may even encourage this because they find it amusing. However, as the kitten grows stronger with bigger teeth, it can become painful.

If it becomes a problem you need to withdraw any attention as soon as the cat bites so that you are not rewarding the behaviour. Walk away and leave the cat alone. Give attention when the kitten is behaving as you want. If you want to play games, use a fishing rod type toy that allows you to keep your hands and feet at a safe distance from your cat's teeth and claws.

## Aggression in hand-reared kittens

Aggression can also be a problem in some hand-reared cats if their behaviours are interrupted or frustrated. It is thought that this is because, although we feed and then wean the kittens nutritionally, we do not wean the kittens behaviourally. Just as we teach our children to do as they are told, to cope when they cannot get their own way and to fit in with our social rules, "queens" teach their kittens the feline equivalent.

Much of this learning is to do with dealing with forced change – as the mother's milk reduces and the kittens demand more, she redirects their attention onto prey and, in making the switch successfully, they learn to be adaptable and to deal with the frustration. Many hand-reared kittens do not learn this vital lesson in life and so react aggressively to frustration.





## Aggression between cats

Aggression between cats can be a common problem when new cats are introduced to a household – this can be tackled by making careful introductions and through passage of time.

Sometimes, even cats which have lived alongside one another for years have a breakdown in their relationship and begin to fight. In some cases this may be remedied, but sometimes it can be virtually impossible to get cats back together and you may need to consider rehoming one.

If you are having persistent problems with aggression of any type, especially if targeted towards people, you may wish to talk to your vet about referral to a feline behavioural counsellor.

For further information, see the pet care leaflet, *Introducing your cat to other pets* (C23).

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