

Feline Aggression - VT VMA - Feb 2023

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Feline Social Structure

- Highly variable
- Solitary hunters
- Can adapt to living in large groups when food is readily available
- Hierarchy in feral colonies determined by body size in females and age in males

Why are Cats Social?

- Temperature regulation
- Kitten care
- Mutual defense

Territories

- Males have larger territories, which they mark by urine spraying.
- Females have smaller territories – usually encompassed by male's territory.
- Cats may sleep together but spend active hours alone.
- Female groups are stable; interlopers are rejected.

Day in the Life of a Feral Cat

- Sleep = 40%
- Rest = 22%
- Groom = 15%
- Hunt = 15%
- Travel = 3%
- Eat = 2%

Day in the Life of a House Cat

- Sleep = 60%
- Rest = 25%
- Groom = 10%
- Play = 1%
- Travel = 1%
- Eat = 3%

Feline Aggression

- *In a feral colony, cats who don't get along avoid each other and use time-sharing to access common resources.*
- *In a home, cats are less able to avoid each other due to limited space, which can lead to aggression.*

Feline Aggression

- Threatening or harmful behavior directed toward another individual or group

Medical Causes of Aggression

- Painful conditions
 - Abscesses
 - Arthritis
- Feline ischemic encephalopathy
- Brain tumors (Meningioma)
- Hyperthyroidism
- Hepatic encephalopathy

Feline Aggression

Categories

- Play / predatory
 - Fear
 - Petting-induced
 - Status
 - Territorial
 - Re-directed
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Play Aggression

- Very common problem, especially in young cats
- Usually directed toward moving stimuli (feet)
- May be directed only to certain members of the household
- Cat approaches victim
 - Silent stalking
 - Focused stare
 - Tail twitching
 - Crouching
 - Pouncing

- History
 - Using hands or feet to play with the cat
 - Inadequate opportunity for acceptable play
- Can result in serious injury
 - Deep bite wounds
 - Serious scratches
 - Often frightening to victim

Play Aggression Treatment

- Provide and encourage daily opportunities for acceptable “chase and attack” behaviors.
 - Interactive toys
 - Cat dancers
 - Fishing rod toys
 - Avoid situations that elicit the behavior
 - Enter via a different door
 - Don’t engage in behaviors that appear to elicit play aggression
 - Avoid physical punishment
 - Cat may become fearful and defensively aggressive
 - Interrupt behavior
 - Clap hands
 - Call cat’s name (in a “happy” voice)
 - Anticipate attacks and redirect play
 - Have toys readily available to distract cat when in a playful mood
 - Cat trees or condos
 - Companion cats
 - Food puzzles
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Fear Aggression

- Cat perceives someone or something as a threat
- Can quickly escalate to aggression if cat is unable to escape
- Ears flattened
- Body lowered; legs tucked under body
- Tail tucked underneath

- Pupils dilated
- Hissing, spitting, growling

- Early experience
- History of punishment or poor socialization
- Can occur in any cat
 - Any age, breed, sex

- Genetic predisposition
- If behavior results in retreat of the threat, the aggression is reinforced

Fear Aggression Treatment

- Identify stimuli and threshold for fear
 - **Counterconditioning**
 - Changing an animal's emotional response to a stimulus

 - **Desensitization**
 - Controlled exposure to stimuli below threshold for fear
 - GRADUALLY increase intensity of stimuli

 - Drug therapy
 - SSRI
 - TCA
 - (Buspirone)

 - Pheromones
 - Feliway[®] Optimum
 - Feliway[®] Multicat
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Petting-Induced Aggression

- After a certain amount of petting, cat becomes aggressive
- May actively seek attention from owners
- Very frustrating to owners

Petting-Induced Aggression Treatment

- Determine petting threshold
- Reward with a treat for tolerating petting (stopping before threshold is reached)
- Gradually increase time spent petting

- Pet cat *only* during re-training sessions
 - Pet only or predominantly on the head and neck
 - Watch for pre-aggression cues
 - Fidgeting
 - Tail twitching
 - Tensing
 - Skin twitching
 - Ears turning back or flattening
 - Low growling
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Status Aggression

- Cat bites or attacks owners or other cats in order to control a situation or resource
- Controls access to furniture or other resources
- Assertive, pushy behavior
- May bite when petted too long

Status Aggression Treatment

- Avoid situations that trigger aggression
 - Owner must control all resources and initiate all interactions
 - Teach cat to sit on a mat on command
 - Reward cat *only* when sitting on mat
 - Use commands and rewards to remove cat from furniture
 - Reward cat for accepting handling
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Territorial Aggression

- Aggression towards visitors or other cats to expel them from the cat's territory
- Seeks out victim
- Approaches and lunges even if victim stands still or walks away

Territorial Aggression Treatment

- Confine cat when people visit
- Avoid adopting another cat
- Block view of outside cats to avoid re-directed aggression

- Counterconditioning and desensitization to people and household cats
 - Prevention – separation period when introducing a new cat
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Redirected Aggression

- Occurs when the cat is aroused and cannot reach the intended target
- An innocent bystander (another cat or person) becomes the victim
- Very acute, intense, and uninhibited
- Triggers
 - Sight, sound, or odor of another cat
 - Sight, sound, or odor of another animal
 - Loud noises
 - Unfamiliar people
 - Unfamiliar environments
 - Pain

Redirected Aggression Treatment

- Do NOT try to handle the cat
 - Identify and remove stimuli for arousal
 - Close curtains to block view of outside cats
 - Remove odor of other cats
 - Keep people and cats away until cat calms
 - Confine cat to a quiet, darkened room
 - Make take several days for cat's arousal level to diminish
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Treatment of Acute, Serious Feline Aggression

- Isolate cat in quiet, darkened room
 - Assess every few hours; bring tasty food
 - To take cat to veterinarian, put cardboard box over cat and slide cookie sheet underneath
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Inter-Cat Aggression

- May be territorial, fear-related, redirected, pain-induced, or hormonally-related
- May occur after change in social group or to the environment
- Common when first introducing cats

Treatment of Inter-Cat Aggression

- Separate
- Medicate – if necessary
 - Buspirone for victim
 - SSRI or TCA for aggressor
- Odor exchange
 - Rub each cat with same towel
 - Feliway®
- Re-introduce *gradually* (weeks to months)
- Give aggressor smaller or less desirable place of confinement
- Give victim larger, more desirable place

Social Groups

- Determine number of social groups within home
 - Which cats engage in allogrooming and / or interact amicably?
- Provide equal but separate essential resources for *each* group

Treatment of Inter-Cat Aggression

- Instruct owners on feline threats
 - Stares
 - Posture
- Interrupt threats
- Bells on aggressor as warning to victim

Reintroduction

- At least 1 week of total separation (behind a closed door)
- Provide each cat with necessary and desired resources (food, water, litter boxes, beds, perches, etc.)
- Rotate confinement areas / odor exchange
- Feed cats on opposite side of door, but far enough apart that both cats will eat
- After 3-5 days without any sign of fear or aggression (e.g., no growling, hissing, caterwauling, etc.), move dishes a few inches closer to door
- Gradually move dishes closer every 3-5 days until can eat next to door

- When cats can eat next to door, begin decreasing the barrier every 5-7 days:
 - E.g., stack two baby gates in doorway and cover with a heavy blanket → light blanket → bed sheet → begin to raise sheet a couple inches every 5-7 days
- When cats can eat adjacent to just baby gate barrier, allow cats to eat meals in same room (keep separated otherwise)
- Decrease distance between food dishes gradually until cats can eat right next to one another
- Gradually increase time that cats are together after meals
- Alternatively, have cats on opposite ends of room; both cats or only aggressor in a carrier or tethered on a harness
- Proceed as before:
 - After 3-5 days of cats eating with no sign of aggression (e.g., no growling, hissing, caterwauling, etc.), feed an inch closer
 - Continue until cats can eat right next to one another
- Ensure adequate availability of resources for each cat
 - Perches and hiding areas
 - Food
 - Litter boxes
- *Important for cats to have positive experiences during all exposures to each other*