



Managing Your Kitten's Rough Play

The first step with any behavioral issue is to take your cat to the veterinarian for a full evaluation. Cats are very stoic animals and will hide illness and injury. Sometimes our only clue that something is physically wrong is a behavioral symptom. Many behavioral modification programs can begin in conjunction with or shortly after your trip to the veterinarian.

Kittens love to play but kittens also NEED to play! Kittens use play to explore the world, learn social skills and practice hunting. Chasing, pouncing, biting and kicking are all normal ways that cats and kittens play with objects and with each other. For a young kitten up to a few years old, you ideally should have 3 to 4 scheduled play sessions a day.

Typically, kittens adopted in pairs or who have had adequate time with their siblings will learn appropriately to not bite and to retract their claws to keep from hurting their playmates. They will learn stalking and hunting behaviors by playing with toys. You should be using interactive toys to play with your kitten several times a day and you should be leaving smaller toys laying around for them to explore while you are away. The most popular interactive toys are wand toys with a long string that ends in a feather, mouse or another toy. You should also consider purchasing interactive feeders for your kitten to bat around and receive a portion of her daily kibble or treats throughout the day.

You should be the one setting rules and boundaries for your kitten. Make sure everyone in the house is aware of the kitten's rules and inform guests as well. One of your rules should be that the kitten is NEVER allowed to play with hands, feet or any other human body part. Allowing this behavior will lead to injuries and aggressive behavior towards humans. It is a very important lesson for your kitten to learn when it is appropriate to play and what things are appropriate to use as toys.

It is not uncommon for a kitten or young cat to test the boundary of acceptable vs unacceptable playing. As a parent, your job is to clearly enforce that line and redirect the kitten's play to an acceptable target. For example, if your kitten has previously been encouraged to bite and kick human hands you will need to redirect that need onto a soft toy that is about the same size as your kitten.

Scheduled play times are very important. You should be initiating play with your kitten several times a day, ideally BEFORE your kitten decides to pounce on you to get you to play. It might be helpful to keep track of your kitten's favorite times to play and schedule your play session 20 to 30 minutes before that time. A natural schedule for a cat would be to play, eat, groom and then sleep. Use this pattern to your benefit especially if your kitten wakes you up at night wanting to play.

Encourage your kitten to play by dragging a toy along the floor for her to pounce on or throw a toy across the room for her to chase. Keep things interesting by changing the toys you use each day and

putting away the interactive wand toys when you are finished playing. Provide small toys, ping pong balls and plush toys to wrestle with when you are away. When you are using the interactive wand toys, mimic the movements for live prey to encourage hunting behaviors.

Discourage your kitten from inappropriately playing by withdrawing your attention. If your kitten starts playing too roughly stop the play session. Say “ouch” in a high pitched voice and leave the room if your kitten bites or scratches you. The kitten will quickly learn what behaviors make you end the play session. She may continue to test how rough she can play so be consistent in which behaviors cause the games to end and which behaviors cause you to leave the room completely. Be sure to reengage your kitten in a play session after a short break.

Do not attempt to tap, flick or hit your kitten. Any form of physical punishment will lead to fear and further aggression from your kitten. Even picking her to move her to a time out room could be reinforcing her behavior. That is why YOU should be the one to leave the area. Be sure to clean all wounds thoroughly and consult a doctor for severe bites.

See also the article on [Understanding Your Kitten's Behavior](#).

If after trying these suggestions you are still experiencing undesirable behaviors in your cat, SUBMIT QUESTIONS by clicking the link under Ask A Trainer on the Behavior and Training page of the Wayside Waifs website: www.waysidewaifs.org.

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