



**If playing with your kitten evolves from peek-a-boo to professional wrestling, follow these tips to keep playtime interesting and reduce the number of trips to the first aid kit!**

Cats incorporate a variety of elements into their play, such as exploratory, investigative and predatory behaviors and skills that they would normally need for survival. As you've probably already learned, kittens like to explore new areas and investigate anything that moves. They may bat at, pounce on and bite objects that resemble prey.

It's not always easy for cats to draw the line between acceptable play and overly aggressive behavior, so play-motivated aggressive behaviors are common in young, active cats less than two years of age and in cats who live in single-cat households.

Cats learn how to inhibit their bite from their littermates and their mother. A kitten who is separated from their family too early may play more roughly than a kitten who has had more time with their littermates. In addition, if humans play with a young kitten using hands and feet instead of toys, the kitten is going to learn that rough play with humans is okay. In most cases, it's not too difficult to teach your kitten or young adult cat that rough play isn't acceptable.

## DO

### **Encourage Acceptable Behavior**

Redirect your kitten's aggressive behavior onto acceptable objects like toys. Drag a toy away from your kitten to pounce on, or throw a toy away from your kitten to give them even more exercise chasing the toy. Some kittens will even bring the toy back to be thrown again. You can also try toys that your kitten can wrestle with, like a soft stuffed animal that's about their size, so they can grab it with both front feet, bite it and kick it with her back feet. This is one of the ways kittens play with each other, especially when they are young. It's also one of the ways they try to play with human feet and hands, so it's important to provide this type of alternative play target. Encourage play with a "wrestling toy" by rubbing it against your kitten's belly when it wants to play roughly - and be sure to get your hand out of the way as soon as your kitten accepts the toy.

Since kittens need a lot of playtime, try to set up three or four consistent times during the day to initiate play with your kitten. This will help them understand that they don't have to be the one to initiate play by pouncing on you.



## Discourage Unacceptable Behavior

You need to set the rules for your kitten's behavior. Every person your cat comes in contact with should reinforce these rules. Your kitten can't be expected to learn that it's okay to play roughly with Dad, but not with the baby. **Children often don't understand that playing too roughly with a kitten or cat is unacceptable and need to be supervised and taught how to appropriately play with pets.**

Use aversives to discourage your kitten from nipping. You can either use a squirt bottle filled with water and a small amount of vinegar or a can of pressurized air to squirt your kitten when it starts to get too rough. To use this technique effectively, you'll need to have the spray bottle or air can handy at all times - **it's essential to use the aversive as soon as rough behavior starts to occur during a play session.** So, either place a spray bottle or air can in each room, or carry one on your belt loop or in your pocket.

In some cases, you may want to apply taste aversives to your hands or feet. When choosing a taste aversive, you will want to choose either a spicy taste (Tabasco sauce or "Bite Guard" are two excellent options) or a citrus taste such as lemon juice. "Bitter Apple" seems to deter dogs from chewing but does not work as well for cats. If you have sensitive skin, you can apply the aversive to gloves. This may be a disadvantage as your kitten may learn that gloved hands taste bad but bare hands don't.

Redirect the behavior after using the aversive. After you startle your kitten with the aversive immediately offer them a toy to wrestle with or chase. This will encourage them to direct her rough play onto a toy instead of a human. We recommend keeping a stash of toys in each room for this purpose.

### Withdraw attention when your kitten starts to play too roughly

If the distraction and redirection techniques don't seem to be working, the most drastic thing you can do to discourage your cat from rough play is to withdraw all attention. They want to play with you, so if you keep this limit consistent, they will eventually figure out how far they can go. The best way to withdraw your attention is to walk into another room and close the door long enough for the cat to calm down. **If you pick the kitten up to put it in another room, then you're rewarding the behavior by touching it,** so you should always be the one to leave the room.

*Please note: None of these methods will be very effective unless you also give your kitten acceptable outlets for their energy - by playing with them regularly using appropriate toys.*

## DON'T

### Attempt to tap, flick or hit your kitten for rough play

This is almost guaranteed to backfire. Your kitten could become afraid of your hands, you entirely or she could interpret taps or flicks as playful moves by you and play more roughly as a result. Picking up your kitten to put her in a "timeout" may reinforce the behavior because it enjoys the physical contact of being picked up. By the time you get it to the timeout room and close the door, the kitten may have already forgotten what it did to be put in that situation.

If your kitten continues to bite or scratch you, call your veterinarian or animal behavior specialist for suggestions on how to redirect its behavior to appropriate objects. In the event that your kitten does scratch you, clean all scratches and apply antibiotic ointment. If you receive a bad bite, you should seek medical attention immediately.