



MANAGING ROUGH KITTEN PLAY

Play-motivated aggressive behaviors are common in young, active cats less than two years of age, and in cats that live in one-cat households. When cats play they incorporate a variety of behaviors into their play, such as exploratory, investigative and predatory behaviors. Play provides young cats with the opportunity to practice skills they would normally need for survival. Kittens like to explore new areas and investigate anything that moves, and may bat at, pounce on, and bite objects which resemble prey.



Kittens learn how to inhibit their bite from their littermates and their mother. If Elsa was separated from her family too early she may play more roughly than a kitten that has had more valuable family time. In addition, if humans play with Elsa using their hands and/or feet instead of toys, she is liable to learn that rough play with people is okay. In most cases, it's possible to teach a kitten or young adult cat that rough play isn't acceptable behavior.

Encourage Acceptable Behavior

Redirect Elsa's aggressive behavior onto acceptable objects such as toys. Drag a toy along the floor to encourage Elsa to pounce on it, or throw a toy away from Elsa to give her even more exercise by chasing down the toy. Some kittens will even fetch and bring the toy back to be thrown again. Another good toy is one that Elsa can wrestle with, like a soft stuffed toy that's about the size of Elsa, so she 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're 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 Elsa's belly when she wants to play roughly. Since kittens need a lot of playtime, try to set up three or four consistent times during the day to initiate play with Elsa. This will help her understand that she doesn't have to be the one to initiate play by pouncing on people.

Discourage Unacceptable Behavior

Set the rules for Elsa's behavior and every other person she comes in contact with should also reinforce these rules. Elsa can't be expected to learn it's okay to play rough with dad, but not with the baby.

Use Aversives to Discourage Kittens from Nipping

Use a squirt bottle filled with water and a small amount of vinegar or a can of pressurized air to squirt Elsa with when she becomes too rough. To use this technique effectively, always have the spray bottle or can handy. Place one in each room, or carry one throughout the house. In some cases, apply taste aversives to hands. Individuals with sensitive hands may want to wear gloves and put the aversive on the gloves. The possible disadvantage to this method is that Elsa may learn that hands with gloves taste bad and those without gloves don't. Remember, aversives will work only if offered with acceptable alternatives.

Redirect the Behavior after Using the Aversive

Once Elsa has been startled with the aversive, immediately offer her a toy to wrestle with or to chase. This will encourage her to direct her rough play onto a toy instead of a person. It is recommended that a stash of toys be hidden in each room specifically for this purpose.

Withdraw Attention when Kitten Begins Playing too Roughly

If the distraction and redirection techniques don't seem to be working, the most drastic thing to do to discourage Elsa from her rough play is to withdraw all attention when she starts playing too roughly. Elsa wants to play, so eventually she'll figure out how far she can go by keeping this limit consistent. The best way to withdraw attention is to leave the room, and close the door long enough for her to calm down. Picking up Elsa to place her in another room, rewards by touching her.

Note: None of these methods will be effective unless Elsa is provided with acceptable outlets for her energy, by playing with her regularly and using appropriate toys.

What Not to Do

Attempts to tap, flick or hit Elsa for rough play are almost guaranteed to backfire. Elsa could become afraid of hands, or she could interpret those flicks as playful moves and play even more roughly as a result.

Picking up Elsa to put her into a timeout might reinforce her behavior because she probably enjoys the physical contact of being picked up. By the time she's placed in her timeout room and the door closed, she has probably already forgotten what she did to be placed in that situation.

Aggression

Kittens can bite or scratch through the skin. In these cases it's best to seek help from a behavior specialist to work with Elsa's behavior. Be sure to keep Elsa confined until professional help can be secured. Be sure to thoroughly clean all bites and scratches and consult a physician, as cat scratches and bites can easily become infected.