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Feline Aggression Directed Toward People

Can you give me some basic information on feline aggression directed toward people so that I can categorize the problem and give accurate advice?

The tendency to display aggression is influenced by the environment, heredity, and early experiences. The most commonly accepted diagnostic categories for feline aggression directed toward people are play-related aggression, displaced predatory behavior, petting-induced aggression, defensive or fear-related aggression, redirected aggression, and offensive aggression.

Medical, environmental, and social issues can influence aggressive responses; therefore, a good medical examination and behavioral history are essential for diagnosis and treatment. Any medical problems identified should be treated, but behavioral issues may still remain. Behavioral historical questions should include when and where the aggressive episodes occur; the victims; and the body postures and facial expression of the cat before, during, and after the incident.

Victim responses can influence the pattern of aggression and should be explored. Determining the frequency of aggressive episodes will help to determine prognosis and treatment response. Try to assess the intensity of the aggressive response, including whether it consisted of hissing, swatting, growling, chasing, wrestling,

biting, or scratching. Explore the social and environmental situations with other pets and the humans in the home; these can contribute to the expression of aggressive responses. Other situations that create or contribute to anxiety should be noted in the history.

The Role of Environment

The environment may play a large role in the expression of aggression. The cat's ability to get away—to hide under something or climb up to a high space—can influence the expression of the aggressive response. Cats that are restricted in movement may choose to fight when unable to flee, resulting in defensive and fearful motivations. Cats that are aggressively aroused but cannot reach the target of the aggression may redirect that emotion to the closest individual, either another animal or a human.

Cats living in stressful social environments may show anxiety and defensive responses, and cats living in environments without appropriate outlets for normal behaviors may show play-related aggression. Petting-induced aggression may be the result of a cat's low tolerance for physical contact and/or owners who insist on petting the cat.



Interpreting Body Language

Understanding feline body language will help with diagnosis. Cats use body postures in an attempt to avoid outright aggression. Threatening body postures include hissing, piloerection, arching of the back, and side presentation. Defensive aggression is usually indicated by ears turned to the side and back, low body posture, dilated pupils, and piloerection (a sign of sympathetic arousal). In offensive aggression, the ears are turned back and up at the ends and hopping and charging can occur, along with growling and hissing. Predatory responses involve a silent stalking ambush, slow walk, and crouching, often followed by a short run,

continues

springing, lunging, and pouncing.¹ In play-related aggression, behavioral sequences usually occur in a random order and without emotional manifestations, such as fear or aggressive growling or hissing.

Underlying Factors

Aggression is only a sign and may indicate other disorders and anxieties. For successful treatment, all factors contributing to aggressive responses must be identified and addressed. These include internal factors, such as pain, illness, or infection (viral or bacterial diseases); behavioral factors (such as early learning, socialization, and acute or chronic stress); and environmental factors (such as lack of space or resources, inability to express normal behaviors, presence of other animals, and poor social environment). Multiple factors can coexist, and rarely does aggression arise from one cause only.

Management

Management is an important first step for all aggressive disorders. The family should try to meet the cat's needs for play, social interaction, quiet time alone, hiding places and climbing areas. Adequate and easily accessed resources (food, water, resting areas, and elimination locations) and safety from other animals (and, if necessary, humans) are also important. A few common aggressive complaints are discussed in more detail below.

Play-Related Aggression

Common in cats that spend a great deal of time alone, play-related aggression can become injurious if the cat lacks self-control or plays roughly or with human body parts, perhaps even climbing up humans. The first step is to provide daily 10- to 15-minute interactive play sessions that incorporate aerobic play and undivided owner attention. While play may wane after a few minutes, substituting a new toy will usually result in resumption of play at the previous level.² At other times, the cat should be provided with a rotating selection of toys, such as boxes, bags, feeder toys, and puzzle boxes. Play items should be tailored to the individual cat's prefer-

ences. Outfitting the cat with a quick-release collar with several bells allows family members to keep track of the pet and avoid attacks. Attacks toward people can be anticipated; the cat can be interrupted with noise and then distracted by throwing a toy to redirect the behavior.

Petting-Induced Aggression

This type of aggression often results from the mismatch between an owner's desire for physical contact and the cat's desires. Owners must learn the signs of impending aggressive responses; when they see these signals, they should stop all interaction immediately and allow the cat to leave or, if the cat is on someone's lap, stand up so that the cat jumps to the floor. Associating petting with something pleasant (such as a food reward) may teach some cats to tolerate a greater degree of petting. The owner can pet the cat a few times, being careful to stay below the threshold that elicits aggression, and reward the cat for good behavior. Over time, the cat may learn to tolerate more petting. Many cats simply prefer limited scratching around the head and neck and do not seem to enjoy prolonged petting down the body. Respecting this preference helps prevent petting-induced aggression.

Defensive or Fear-Related & Redirected Aggression

When cornered, anxious, or perceiving itself to be in danger, a cat may become fearful and defensive. Illness can change the threshold for an aggressive response and make a cat more irritable. The response can vary from hissing or inhibited swatting or biting to severe injurious attacks. The proximity of the threat and the cat's experiences will influence the response. Defensive reactions may become conditioned by association with triggering events or by operant learning. The aggressive response can generalize to other similar situations or be redirected at inappropriate times. Redirected aggression occurs when the cat is in an aggressively arousing situation, cannot get to the target, and redirects the aggressive response to the nearest individual, either human or animal. Desensitiza-

tion and counter-conditioning are used to help the cat learn that certain situations are not frightening or dangerous; these methods are detailed in other sources.³⁻⁵

Offensive Aggression

This type of aggression may be difficult to correlate with a triggering event or stimulus. The cat may become aggressively aroused and go after certain humans or other animals. In many situations, the problem is some other underlying anxiety that has changed the threshold for an aggressive response. Serious injuries are possible if the cat is uninhibited in its responses. Attempting to confine the cat should be done cautiously to avoid injury.

Overall Management

At times, placing an aggressively aroused cat in a quiet, dark, isolated area may help diminish the aggressive response. This can be accomplished by using cardboard to maneuver the cat or by covering the cat with a large box or heavy blanket to avoid human injury. In many situations, treating any underlying anxiety caused by environmental or social situations is essential when trying to diminish aggressive responses.

Although not approved for use in cats, medication may be appropriate in some cases of defensive and offensive aggression. Commonly used classes of drugs include selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors, tricyclic antidepressants, antianxiety medications, and pheromones. Indications and dosages are detailed in other sources.^{3,4}

When aggressive episodes are frequent or injury occurs, immediate intervention is required. Referral to a veterinary behaviorist is appropriate for cases that cannot be handled by the primary care veterinarian. ■

See Aids & Resources, back page, for references, contacts, and appendices.

