

PEDIATRIC BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS—CATS

BASICS

OVERVIEW

- Undesirable behaviors exhibited by kittens between birth and puberty—behaviors in this age range are particularly vulnerable to developmental and environmental influences
- Behaviors acquired during this period may be difficult to change; preventive measures are extremely important

GENETICS

- Possible influences for fearfulness in kittens by the tomcat (that is, the father cat)

SIGNALMENT/DESCRIPTION of ANIMAL

Species:

- Cats

Breed Predispositions:

- None

Mean Age and Range:

- Precise data unknown

Predominant Sex:

- None

SIGNS/OBSERVED CHANGES in the ANIMAL

- Most common behavior problems of kittens are related to play, fearfulness, defensive aggression, and elimination
- Play is composed of components of other behaviors, often hunting or predatory behavior and fighting between cats; play can be solitary, with objects, or social (that is, with other kittens or cats)
- Social play often is accompanied by signals that indicate the activity is play and not a “serious” encounter
- During normal play, bites are inhibited and claws not extended fully; play is adjusted to the partner—if one partner escalates the intensity, the other usually follows suit
- If play gets too rough, one partner may signal that the activity is too rough (such as vocalize, quit, or become defensively aggressive and inflict injury)
- Play directed towards people or other animals in the house may be unwelcome, either due to frequency or intensity
- Fear and defensive behaviors include hiding, fleeing, and aggression
- Fear/defensive aggression often is characterized by flattened ears, hissing, and dilated pupils

Fear and Defensive Behaviors Due to Lack of Early Experience

- Behaviors associated with fear (such as dilated pupils, hair standing up, especially over the back and tail [known as “piloerection”], defensive postures, hissing, hiding, fleeing, aggression)
- Has always been afraid of people

Aggressive Play Directed Towards People

- Unsolicited attacks by kitten directed towards people
- Inhibited bites may indent the skin, and light scratches with claws—if person’s skin is soft or fragile, the wounds may break the skin
- If a person runs away, puts feet up, or tries to brush kitten away, the intensity of the play may increase—ambushes are common
- No vocalizations
- Generally starts when a kitten, but may continue into adulthood
- Usually seen in a single-kitten household
- Often ritualized, occurring in same locations and same time of day
- Often directed to specific persons

Uninhibited Aggressive Play Directed Towards People

- Signs similar to normal aggressive play, except more intense
- Bites are not as inhibited and usually break the person’s skin

Aggressive Play Directed Towards Other Cats in the Household

- Unsolicited attacks by kitten directed towards other cat
- Other cat, usually elderly, either runs and hides or responds by hissing, threatening, or seriously retaliating and attacking kitten

Normal Play Directed Towards Objects in the Household

- Bursts of solitary play that include intense running across household furnishings
- Shredding objects or propelling self along back underneath furniture

- Knocks over objects and removes them from horizontal surfaces

CAUSES

Fear and Defensive Behaviors Due to Lack of Early Experience

- No exposure to people when the kitten is between 3 and 7 weeks of age

Aggressive Play Directed Towards People or Other Cats in the Household

- Normal cat or species-typical behavior
- Lack of other outlets for play

Uninhibited Aggressive Play Directed Towards People

- Orphan-reared kitten with no littermates or other cats with which to play
- Rough play encouraged by people
- Teasing kitten

Normal Play Directed Towards Objects in the Household

- Normal cat or species-typical behavior

Fear and Defensive Behaviors Related to Early Trauma

- Normal behavior until kitten experienced traumatic event (such as abuse, attack by another animal)

Fear and Defensive Behaviors Related to Correction Techniques

- Normal behavior until kitten “corrected” by person (such as spanked, hit on the nose, yelled at, or chased)

RISK FACTORS

Aggressive Play Directed Towards People or Other Cats in the Household

- The only young cat in the household
- No appropriate outlets provided for normal play and exploration

Uninhibited Aggressive Play Directed Towards People

- The longer the delay between 3 weeks of age and when an orphan-reared kitten experiences play with other kittens and/or cats, the more likely uninhibited aggressive play will occur
- Adolescent or juvenile male human in household

Normal Play Directed Towards Objects in the Household

- Lack of environmental stimuli
- No appropriate toys available
- Little or no interactive play with people or other animals
- Only kitten or pet in household

TREATMENT

HEALTH CARE

- Outpatient

ACTIVITY

- Many pediatric behavior problems can be alleviated or reduced by enriching the kitten’s environment (such as providing movable toys; engaging in interactive play; allowing the kitten access to windows; not shutting kitten in small, barren rooms)

DIET

- Undoubtedly influences development of nervous system and behavior, but specifics unclear
- Premium prenatal diet for the mother cat (queen) and premium kitten diets

MEDICATIONS

- None needed, unless fear and anxiety is extreme

FOLLOW-UP CARE

PATIENT MONITORING

- Two, 12 and 26 weeks after the initial consultation, re-check by phone or during subsequent visits

PREVENTIONS AND AVOIDANCE

- Kitten behavior problems can be prevented
- Kittens should experience positive interactions with people between 3 and 7 weeks of age
- Clients with children in the household specifically should be advised to prohibit roughhouse play with kittens
- Punishment may result in fear, anxiety, and defensive aggression in the kitten; avoid punishment of the kitten

- Behavior education (including advice from the veterinarian, pamphlets, videos, or books) at routine office visits or special kitten appointments

POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

- Defensive or aggressive behavior as an adult cat
- Injury to other animals or people
- A weakened bond with the pet and possible relinquishment to a shelter

EXPECTED COURSE AND PROGNOSIS

Normal Play Behaviors Directed Towards People, Other Cats, and Household Objects

- Appropriately followed treatment protocols should result in quick reduction or resolution of problem; if behavior not resolving, follow-up appointment is needed

Uninhibited Aggressive Play Directed Towards People

- Guarded prognosis

Fear and Defensive Behaviors Due to Lack of Early Experience or Related to Early Trauma

- It may take months, or even years, to acclimate the kitten to people; kittens will vary in the degree to which they acclimate; some kittens may never be comfortable around people
- If clients report no improvement, it may be that they are inadvertently reinforcing escape and defense behaviors by advancing towards the kitten
- The longer the interval between 3 weeks of age and lack of exposure to people, the poorer the prognosis
- The more intense the early trauma, the poorer the prognosis

Fear and Defensive Behaviors Related to Correction Techniques

- Should resolve within weeks, if clients follow advice
- The more frequent the correction, the poorer the prognosis

KEY POINTS

Aggressive Play Directed Towards People

- The most effective treatment is to acquire an additional kitten of the same size and temperament; the kittens will play with each other, and attacks directed towards people should diminish
- Interactive play with kitten using toys or objects that move; should play on a regular, daily basis
- Identify circumstances in which the attacks occur and redirect the play to another object (such as a string, ball)
- Do not encourage escalation of play with evasive actions or mild aversive techniques
- Can use a startling stimulus (such as water, foghorns, compressed air, and citronella spray) as a punisher—such a stimulus will not work unless it is used every time the kitten attacks
- Do not hit, kick, or snap kitten on nose with fingers—such actions frequently elicit an immediate serious aggressive response from kitten and/or induce residual fear and fear-induced aggression towards that person
- Frequent trimming of tips of claws helps reduce damage

Aggressive Play Directed Towards Other Cats in the Household

- Acquire an additional kitten of the same size and temperament of the problem kitten
- If acquiring another kitten is not an option, the problem kitten and older cat must have restricted access to each other
- Startling, punitive techniques would affect the older cat aversively
- Interactive play with kitten using toys or objects that move on a regular, daily basis

Uninhibited Aggressive Play Directed Towards People

- Treatments would be similar to those used for normal aggressive play, except it is unwise to acquire a second kitten as the problem kitten might injure a second kitten
- Declawing is an option although controversy exists about the humaneness of this procedure, several studies indicate that declawing is not psychologically harmful to cats—declawing may be preferable to relinquishment of the kitten to animal control or an animal shelter

Normal Play Directed Towards Objects in the Household

- Put valuable, breakable, or dangerous objects away
- Provide appropriate toys for kitten
- Interactive play with kitten using toys or objects that move on a regular and daily basis
- Prohibit access to items
- “Booby-traps” or self-activated punishers might be used to keep kitten away from a few select objects or areas
- Provide scratching posts
- Frequent trimming of tips of claws or Soft Claws® or beads applied to claws
- Declawing is an option; although controversy exists about the humaneness of this procedure, several studies indicate that declawing is not psychologically harmful to cats—declawing may be preferable to relinquishment of the kitten to animal control or an animal shelter

Fear and Defensive Behaviors Due to Lack of Early Experience

- Gradual exposure to people without forcing any interactions

- In general, the kitten should be housed where it is comfortable, can remove itself from view but be continuously/very frequently aware of people
- Generally counterconditioning is required—initially, food can be put in or near the hiding area; gradually the food is placed further from the hiding area and closer to where a person is stationary; no attempt should be made to grab the kitten; the food can be left progressively further from the hiding place while people engage in their normal activities and the food eventually may be placed on a person's lap
- Toys on strings can be used to entice the kitten to play; eventually the kitten may accept stroking, then holding
- Important principles to remember are to let the kitten make the advances—not the person—and avoid scaring the kitten; frightened kittens can bite and scratch

Fear and Defensive Behaviors Related to Early Trauma

- Identify the stimuli that elicit the fearful and/or defensive behaviors
- Employ behavior modification techniques, as described previously

Fear and Defensive Behaviors Related to Correction Techniques

- Identify and cease inappropriate punitive behaviors of people
- Identify the stimuli that elicit the fearful and/or defensive behaviors
- Employ behavior modification techniques, as described previously

