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GREATER BATON ROUGE

# How to Get the Cat to Quit Biting in Play

by Margaret Schill

Play for kittens is instinctive practice for hunting and fighting survival skills. For adult cats, it is "pretending" to hunt or fight. So therefore, much pouncing, grabbing, kicking and biting is involved in cat play. While one comes to understand the kitten or cat wasn't really trying to hurt, it still does hurt. Interactive play and a variety of toys around are important to help keep cats from playing rough with human bodies.

## **Kittens need to grab, kick and chew on things, such as stuffed toys.**

Getting another kitten close to the same age can be the best thing to do about a young kitten that plays rough with people's hands and feet. Kittens naturally rough and tumble with each other a lot. A single kitten still has that urge and without another kitten, a human is viewed as the next best thing. Getting a second cat will also help with older kittens (those over 6 months) and young cats, but first they should go through some behavior modification to cut down on their rough play and learn to use toys to play wrestle with, or the new cat will take it as an attack rather than play, and then you will be needing help with fighting cats! Do *not* get a tiny kitten to pair with an adult cat because the great difference in size and strength make them unsuitable as playmates, and the tiny kitten could get hurt. Keep in mind that cats do need to be introduced gradually because cats are naturally territorial.

## **Kittens and cats need interactive play.**

Kittens and cats need some interactive play daily. Kittens, especially, have tons of energy that they need to work off. Daily interactive play with nippy kittens and cats can curb their trying to play rough with humans. Sometimes cats nip at people trying to get the humans to start playing something with them, not meaning they want to play with the human's hand. It is good to have a more or less set schedule of times you will routinely engage in interactive play with your cat or kitten, so they may hold off nipping at you to play with them, having learned interactive play with you will be a predictable thing every day. Streamer type toys, such as the Cat Charmer and the Kong Cats with an Attitude Swizzle Bird Cat Toy, are safe interactive toys to use with your kitten or cat that allows them to leap and run around trying to catch the end of the streamer. A length of thick rope, like clothesline rope, or a bathrobe sash are also loved by cats to chase after as it is dragged around by a person. You can even tie a small, light weight, toy to the end. Be sure to give the cat some chances to actually catch it, or it will just be frustrating instead of fun. Make sure to have rest breaks, as kittens in particular will keep on even when they are getting overtaxed, overheated and out of breath.

**Never, ever use string, ribbon or yarn, as they are dangerous ingestion hazards to cats.** *Cats cannot spit them out, and wind up swallowing the whole length as they keep trying to spit it out, due to their barbed tongues.*

Fishing pole type toys with a thin string and a toy on the end are NOT safe to use with kittens or adult cats. Many cats have wound up getting the string wrapped tightly around a leg, tail or their neck, since the toy is much heavier than the string and causes the sting to just fly around wrapping a body part. The cat or kitten cannot get themselves unwrapped. Do not get this kind of toy. If you have one, NEVER leave it out where the cat has access to it when you are not there to carefully supervise.

You can also throw some toy mice for the cat to chase after. Some cats will even bring the toy mice back, as in playing "fetch". It is best to get a lot of little toy mice at a time, keeping some put up to then put out for when the other ones get lost. They tend to wind up under the refrigerator, the couch or other places the cats can't retrieve them from. Roll or bounce little cat balls for the cat to chase after. Also, get small stuffed animals. Make one seem "alive" by having it walk around and move towards then away from the cat. When the cat grabs it, let go and let the kitten or cat kick and bite it. Be sure there are no small parts that can come off and then get swallowed by the cat. Stuffed animals sold for cats and dogs can take some rough play better than most stuffed animals sold for humans. Kittens and cats may still try to use people's hands as chew toys, even if the people do have some interactive play daily with the kitten or cat and the cat has several different types of toys.

### **Don't Use Physical Punishment**

NEVER hit, bite, kick, or throw cats if they bite or scratch you, even if you feel shocked and angered. A cat can be seriously hurt by those actions, and the cat will become frightened of you. The cat may also start biting more, but then in self defense if your hand comes near, fearing you will hit him/her again. A swatting hand or flicking a finger at the cat's nose can be taken as an invitation that you want to play rough and the cat may then go back at your hand like it is a chew toy, thinking that you like it. Or, the cat may take those actions as signs of hostility from you. A nose flick can hurt a cat's sensitive nose. Causing pain to a cat is NEVER an appropriate way to try to get the cat to not do something. Simple behavior modification along with redirection will work eventually. In some cases, it works in just a few days. **For some kittens and cats, loud yelps of "Ow!" are all they ever need, especially if the reason behind the biting is really just playing. Some cats need a more dramatic "show", with the person carrying on a bit with the exclamations of "Ouch, that hurt! Oh my poor hand! Ow, ow."** If the person overacts about how much it hurt, that is then often sufficient to make the cat quit biting, mostly because what the person is doing is a bit scary to a cat and is certainly no fun. Always start with the more mild exclamations, as some kittens get very frightened by a lot of carrying on and they may be then be reluctant to let you near them at all for a long while.

### **Time Outs**

Some cats aren't put off for long by cries of "Ouch!". In that case, a time out should be used. The best thing to do first is to walk away from the cat or kitten, after yelping "Ouch!", and ignore the kitten or cat for many minutes. That is a kind of time out as you are taking yourself away from the cat. However, many determined, playful cats and kittens will follow you, maybe nipping at your legs to continue playing. If something like that happens, yelp "Ouch!" again (even if it didn't really hurt) and then put the cat in another room behind a closed door, for a real physical time out. This is to be done calmly and matter-of-factly, with no anger directed towards the cat or any scolding, even if the cat did hurt you. Do not take cat play attacks personally. The cat is not meaning to hurt you. A good half hour is an appropriate length of time for a time-out. The room *needs* to have some cat toys in it, so that the cat has something else to turn to work off that play energy. *This is in no way a reward for the cat.* It is to train and redirect the cat to appropriate items to use to attack and chew on. The cat has a natural urge and instinct to play "hunt and grab" prey, and you want the cat to start viewing toys as the things to use for that, rather than the human body parts the cat was using. In time, the cat will chose the toys more than human body parts, having gotten used to using them when in the "hunting" play mood without the stimulus of your tempting moving hands and feet around. It is never enough to just try to stop a cat from doing something. You also *must* provide acceptable substitutes to fill the need the cat has *when* the cat has the need. If a cat is shut up in a room with nothing to play with to work out the playful mood they are in, once you let them out again, guess what? Back to what they were doing to start with to try to satisfy their play need.

## Redirection

It can also work to redirect kittens and cats to toys while in your presence and this eventually needs to be done. When you notice the cat or kitten is in a playful mood and approaching you, or you see that the cat is hunkered down with the tail swishing, staring at you like you are a tasty mouse needing to get pounced on, quickly grab a toy and toss it for the cat to chase after. If you manage to redirect the cat on several occasions *before* the cat touches you, the cat may become trained to just go for the toys when in a pounce and hunt mood when you are in the room and without you needing to toss them first. This is the ideal you are striving for. If the cat drops a toy at your feet and looks at you, and maybe meows at you, that would be a signal that the cat wants you to toss the toy for the cat to chase. Oblige the cat when this occurs. You want to reward the cat for seeking out toys to play with and "asking" you in peaceful way to play, in order to maintain that correct behavior.

For cats who are a bit rougher and really into wrestling type play, and don't have another cat to play that with, get a stuffed animal almost the same size as the cat for the cat to attack and rough up. Those sold for dogs are best as they are built to take a lot of rough treatment. At first, you may need to entice the cat to take an interest in a stuffed animal as a wrestling partner, by making the stuffed animal move around like it is walking towards the cat. Once the cat grabs it, let go. If the cat is overly determined to use your hands as a chew toy at every opportunity, keeping some stuffed animals around to quickly redirect the cat to when he is in "that mood" will help a great deal. Pay attention to your cat's body language to tell when the playful pounce and attack is about to occur. (See [below](#) for information on body language.) The look of the cat with the stuffed monkey in the picture on the left is the kind of, "I need some action!" look to watch for. Over time, and combined with time-outs if necessary, the cat will stop going for your hands and will use the toys instead.

## Mild Physical Cues

Some cats need a little more emphasis to cut it out, when yelping out loudly has not worked to stop the behavior. Occasionally, it may be necessary to push the cat away from you when it bites you as you are calling out "No bite!" or "OUCH!". Then you might put the cat in time-out for a brief while, especially for repeat offenders. But the pushing is not a smack in any manner, nor hard enough to make the cat get flung away. This technique would not be used if the cat is seriously upset about something, as it will make the cat more upset.

There is a method of disciplining cats that is similar to what mother cats do, often referred to as "scruffing" or the "hold down". You do not lift the cat off his feet, but simply hold him down onto whatever surface he is on by gently grasping the scruff. You do not press the cat hard or shake him around in anger. It is just holding him in one place for a few seconds, to show that you are the "mother", the big boss cat. It is actually a sort of time-out, a time-out from the cat being able to play. This can be effective with young kittens and some cats to help them stop biting in play, but, it should not be the first choice. With a "cocky" very assertive older kitten or an adult cat, you must take care when trying scruffing, as such cats will object to it since they do not want to be controlled, and often will quickly turn around trying to scratch you in protest as soon as you let go. So move your hand away very quickly after holding down a bold, assertive cat!

You first want to try startling with a loud yelp of "Ouch!" or "NO BITE!", time-out and redirection to toys. You want the kitten or cat to be the one controlling themselves (even when put in another room, once in there, the cat is controlling his own body and dealing with the playful feelings on his own). Being held down is very upsetting to some cats. But also, for play aggression it is not a good choice as when cats play wrestle with each other, they do the "hold down" to each other as part of the play! It's a game to see who can hold down who and how well one can get out of the hold. So the cat may think you are really doing some good cat kind of play and when you let go, may take his turn trying to get you! For an older kitten or adult cat, you don't want to try holding them down when they are all keyed up. Cats are a lot stronger and faster than you may think, and play aggression can turn to

defensive or offensive aggression quickly. Then any bites really, really will hurt as well as maybe needing medical attention.

### **Squirt guns ineffective**

Squirting cats with water for nipping due to play aggression is not very effective in most cases. It may stop the cat momentarily, but it does not teach the cat what to do *instead* when the play aggressive mood strikes. You just wind up with a wet, frustrated cat. Some cats may think of it as a game, trying to dodge the water or even to "catch" the water stream. For a cat in the "I *need* to play" mode, dodging water squirts may become something they accept as a kind of play with you that is better than nothing. But, a few kittens or adult cats may be put off to trying to bite in play by a squirt gun. If you use this method, you will likely need to carry around a squirt gun since if consistency is not used, a method isn't very successful.

### **Time and Consistency**

Do remember that it will take some time for a cat to get out of play aggression towards people. For young kittens who are just starting to try it, it might only take three or four days for them to decide it's not a good idea or any fun. It might take two or three weeks, and likely longer for older kittens and adult cats who had gotten used to using people as chew toys. Be consistent with the above techniques and it **will** work.

**Remember to play with your kitten or cat- with toys, not your hands!**