

Teach your kitten how to play nice

A kitten's life is all about play, and play is all about prey. Kittens start to play almost as soon as they hoist themselves up on their teeny paws. And if you look closely, you'll notice that you now have an itty-bitty hunter in your house.

Learning to play nice

Kittens learn how to inhibit their bite from their mothers and littermates. A kitten who is separated from their family too early may not have learned appropriate play behavior, leading to unwanted nipping. Kittens also learn acceptable play from us: if people use their hands and feet instead of toys to play with a young kitten, the kitten may learn that rough play is okay.

In most cases, it's not too difficult to teach your kitten or young adult cat that rough play isn't acceptable. If play escalates too quickly, follow these tips to keep playtime interesting and reduce the number of trips to the first-aid kit.

- Don't let your kitten play with your hands or feet (or any other body part). This sends the message that your fingers and toes are prey for pouncing.
- Use a fishing pole-type toy or throw a toy for them to chase — this keeps them away from your hands and body.
- Give your kitten something to wrestle with. This is one of the ways kittens play with each other, and how they're trying to play when they grapple with human feet and hands, so it's important to provide this type of alternative.
- Encourage play with a "wrestling toy" by rubbing it against your kitten's belly when they have an urge to play roughly—just be sure to get your hand out of the way as soon as they accept the toy.
- Don't hit or yell at your kitten when they nip or pounce. This will only make them fearful of you and they may start to avoid you. The idea is to train them, not punish them.

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Discouraging "bad" behavior

Playing is not bad behavior, but you do have to set the rules for your kitten: no biting. Everyone in the household has to be on the same page, too; your kitten can't be expected to learn that it's okay to play rough with certain people but not with others. Equip yourself with the right training tools: lots of toys and a spray bottle

A gnawing problem

If you're petting your kitten and they start gnawing on you, immediately say "no" and carefully take your hands away. Give them a toy to play with instead and don't try to pet them again until they're tuckered out.

You can also make your hands unattractive to your kitten by putting a bad-tasting, but harmless, substance on them, like Bitter Apple or Tabasco sauce. A kitten will catch on quickly.

Gimmie that!

Kittens always seem to want to play with whatever you're using — knitting needles, a pencil, headphone cords. If your kitten starts "attacking" you when you're working, sharply say "no" to disrupt their behavior. Then give them one of their own toys. Be sure they are not attacking when you give them a toy or they may think they're being rewarded for biting.

On the hunt

Kittens also like to "hunt" you while you're walking around. They'll jump out from behind a door or under a chair and pounce on your ankles. If they don't emerge but don't pounce, praise them with "good kitty," but reprimand them if they aim for your ankles.

Pay no attention

Withdraw attention when your kitten doesn't get the message. If the distraction and redirection techniques don't work, the most drastic thing you can do to discourage your cat from rough play is to withdraw all attention.

The best way to withdraw your attention is to walk to another room and close the door long enough for them to calm down. If you pick them up to put them in another room, then you're rewarding them by touching them, so you should always be the one to leave the room.

Remember, your kitten wants to play with you, not just toys, so be sure to set aside time for regular, safe and interactive play sessions.

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