



Peninsula Humane Society & SPCA

When Your Cat Plays Rough

The sweet little cat you fell in love with at the humane society is suddenly stalking you through the house, pouncing on your ankles. Or, perhaps your grown cat launches himself at your hand as you gesture or reach out to pet him. This wild playfulness used to be cute—perhaps you even encouraged your cat to think of your fingers and toes as fair game when he was little, but now— ouch!

Why is my cat acting this way?

A cat who pounces on your ankles may be telling you he's bored! Play with him more often and let him use up that extra energy in a way that is fun for both of you. Playing comes naturally to cats, bringing out all their instincts and giving them intense pleasure as they use their natural abilities to stalk and "kill."

What should I do if my cat grabs me?

If you miss the warning signs (intent gaze, wagging bottom, stalking posture) and your cat closes his claws or teeth on your hand, freeze and make a distracting noise with your other hand (slap the table, for example). If this doesn't startle your cat into letting go, push your hand gently toward him. No prey would do this, and your confused cat will release you. Now give him a time-out by withdrawing. Give your cat a few moments to calm down and, if you are consistent, to make the connection between what he has done and your sudden refusal to play. If your cat is particularly wound up, you may need to leave the room and close the door for a few minutes. A closed door helps your cat recognize her behavior isn't getting her the attention and continued play she wants.

How can I teach my cat that fingers and toes aren't toys?

First, control your response to these surprise attacks. Never hit or yell at your cat and do not chase her. Your cat will only learn to fear you. Be prepared with the right response to your cat's rough play so you reinforce the change you want to see.

What is the right response? Redirect your cat's attention to an acceptable toy. When your energetic little friend pounces, lure him into a safe play session

by tossing a toy or waggling a mysteriously bobbing "insect" (like a Cat Dancer) just out of his reach. Have a stuffed mouse in your pocket and stage a few toys around the house. Wand toys with snakelike or feather attachments will give your cat the thrill of the chase while you are safely at a distance from his busy paws. Toss ping pong balls down the stairs or into paper bags and watch the action with impunity. Drag a toy or string behind you to give your cat the thrill of pursuit while you go about your business.

At the end of playtime, help your cat wind down by redirecting her to a treat and speaking in a slower, quiet voice.

Consistency and patience are the keys to this training. Every member of your family must follow the plan every time. Never use your bare hands as cat toys or to roughhouse with your cat. No wiggling your fingers under the cover just this once!

If there are children in the household, supervise interactions with your cat and intervene to stop and redirect inappropriate play. Help your older children understand and follow the training plan. Keep younger children (and your cat) safe by monitoring their time together.

Remember:

Observe your cat to see what stimulates her rough play. Use what you learn to prepare for the next incident.

Redirect her attention to an acceptable toy that is safe for both of you.

Distract her if she has already grabbed you by making a noise with your other hand and then redirect her to a suitable target.

Be patient and consistent. If you make 2 or 3 play dates with your cat every day, she will quickly learn to focus her hunting energy on these opportunities. And a cat happily tired out from play is much less likely to stalk you through the house.

Call us, the behaviorists at PHS, if you need more tips about how to play safely with your cat.