



## **Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals**

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### **Managing Your Kitten's Rough Play**

Rough play behaviors are common in young, active cats less than two years of age, and in cats that live in one-cat households. When cats play, they incorporate a variety of behaviors into their play, such as exploratory, investigative and predatory behaviors. Play provides young cats with opportunities to practice skill they would need for survival in the wild. Kittens like to explore new areas and investigate anything that moves, and may bat at, pounce on and bite objects that resemble prey.

Kittens learn how to inhibit their bite from their littermates and their mother. A kitten that is separated from her family too early may play more roughly than a kitten that has had more valuable family time. In addition, if humans play with a young kitten using their hands and/or feet instead of toys, the kitten is liable to learn that rough play with people is okay. In most cases, it's possible to teach your kitten or young adult cat that rough play isn't acceptable behavior.

#### **Encourage Acceptable Behavior**

Redirect your kitten's inappropriate play behavior onto acceptable objects like toys (see our handout: "Cat Toys and How to Use Them"). Drag a toy along the floor to encourage your kitten to pounce on it, or throw a toy away from your kitten to give her even more exercise chasing the toy down. Some kittens will even bring the toy back to be thrown again. Another good toy is one that your kitten can wrestle with, like a stuffed toy that's about the size of your kitten, so she can grab it with her front paws, bite it and kick it with her back paws. This is one of the ways kittens play with each other, especially when they are young. It's also one of the ways they try to play with human feet and hands, so it's important to provide this type of alternative play target. Encourage play with a "wrestling toy" by rubbing it against your kitten's belly when she wants to play roughly--be sure to get your hand out of the way as soon as she accepts the toy.

#### **Discourage Unacceptable Behavior**

You need to set the rules for your kitten's behavior, and every person your cat meets should reinforce these rules. Your kitten can't be expected to learn that it's okay to play rough with Dad, but not with the baby.

► **Withdraw attention when your kitten starts to play too roughly.** If the distraction and redirection techniques don't seem to be working, the most drastic thing you can do to discourage your cat from her rough play is to withdraw all attention when she starts playing too roughly. She wants to play with you, so eventually she'll figure out how far she can go if you keep this limit consistent. The

best way to withdraw your attention is to walk abruptly and silently away to another room, and close the door for about 30 seconds. The time-out should last long enough for her to calm down, but not so long that she figures out a new way to get into trouble.

**Please Note: None of these methods will be very effective unless you also give your kitten acceptable outlets for her energy, by playing with her regularly using appropriate toys.**

### **What Not to Do**

▶ Attempts to tap, flick, or hit your kitten for rough play are almost guaranteed to backfire. Your kitten could become afraid of your hands, or she could interpret those flicks as playful moves by you and play more roughly as a result.

▶ Picking up your kitten to put her into a time-out could reinforce her behavior because she probably enjoys the physical contact of being picked up. By the time you get her to the timeout room and close the door, she has probably forgotten what she did to be put in that situation.

**Aggression:** Kittens can bite or scratch through the skin. In these cases, it's best to seek help from our behavior specialists at 713-869-7722, ext. 187 or email [animals@hspca.org](mailto:animals@hspca.org). Be sure to keep your kitten confined until you can get professional help. Also, be sure to thoroughly clean all bites and scratches and consult your physician, as cat scratches and bites can easily become infected.