



# FieldHaven Feline Rescue

## **Mission**

*Educating our community on responsible pet ownership while providing safe haven for cats and kittens in transition to new lives in permanent homes.*

## Help for Curbing Aggressive Biting and Scratching by Cats

It's always sad to hear of a cat being tossed out because of uncontrollable biting and/or scratching behavior. While this aggressive kind of behavior is painful and frustrating to deal with, try to remember that cats never do anything without a reason. They are actually very predictable creatures, and biting and scratching are cause and effect behaviors just as most undesirable behaviors. There are two basic kinds of biting and scratching behaviors in cats, and both of them are often originally caused by our own human failings. I'll explain more about this later. But for now, remember that biting and scratching are perfectly normal behaviors.

### **Playful Biting and Scratching**

Kittens learn biting and scratching as an important part of their development. After all, these activities are cats' only means of defense, as well as their natural way of killing prey in the wild.

Cats' main form of play involves biting and scratching in "winner takes all" battles, whether with another cat, a toy mouse, or a hapless human who finds himself in the wrong place at the wrong time.

One of the first rules for human companions is "do not teach your cat that hands are toys." If you ignore this advice, those tiny claws and teeth will soon grow into razor-sharp "meat hooks," and you'll bear the scars of your hubris. The man in the photo above (my husband, Asa) has steadfastly ignored this advice, and has the scars to prove it. However, my cats do know not to bite **my** hands.

Okay, so you didn't learn your lesson the first time around. What do you do now when a couple of pets on your cat's tummy are rewarded with bloody scratches? There are a few things you can do to distance yourself from these play attacks:

- **Trim His Claws** - Hey, Rome wasn't built in a night, and it will take quite some time to retrain your cat. Meanwhile, you might as well protect yourself from damage. Claw trimming should be done regularly, anyway. There is no need ever to declaw a cat because of scratching behavior.
- **Yell "Ouch"** - Don't scream it, but say "Ouch" loudly and clearly. While you have your cat's attention, slowly remove your hand from his clutches. Don't yank it away or he'll think play is on, and he'll grab it again.
- **"Scruff Him"** - This is one of the most effective forms of discipline of cats. It mimics the punishment given a kitten by his mother when he became unruly. Grasp him by the scruff of the neck and firmly push him groundward, while saying "No!" in a firm tone of voice. Hold him in this position for only three or four seconds and release. Chances are, he'll slink away, thoroughly chastened, to bathe and recover his dignity. But he'll remember this lesson for a long time.
- **Redirect His Attention** - Often playful biting of hands or feet occurs simply because your cat is bored, and is looking for a play object. Give him 15 minutes of active play with an interactive toy. [Da Bird](#) is a great choice. For two years it has defended its position as the top interactive toy as well as the top overall toy in my Top Picks.

### **Aggressive Biting**

- **Overstimulation** - Aggressive biting often happens during a petting session, when the human companion either doesn't understand, or ignores the cat's body language. While some cats love to be petted for hours on end, sometimes a cat will become over-stimulated for one reason or another, and will want to opt out of the petting session. Your cat will signal his feelings with narrowed eyes, ears pulled back. If you wait for the inevitable tail-lashing, you've waited to

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long, and you may be rewarded with a bite. The rule here is to watch the cat's signals and stop whatever you're doing to prevent this behavior.

- **Fear or Redirected Aggression** - Your cat may become upset at seeing a strange cat through a window, and react by attacking the first thing he sees at hand - either you or another cat.

This kind of behavior will require creative thinking on your part. First, you need to reassure him as to his status in the household. Spend extra time with him, petting (carefully) and playing with him. Give him extra treats when he is able to interact calmly. In extreme cases, your veterinarian may prescribe medication to help him get over his fears.

- **Medical Causes** - Medical causes should never be ignored when new and unusual behavior problems arise, including aggressive biting and scratching. These could range from undetected wounds, distress from mites or fleas, or a hormonal imbalance. If an otherwise docile cat exhibits sudden and unexplained aggressiveness toward you, especially when being handled, a visit to your veterinarian is in order.

One of the most important duties a cat caregiver owes to his or her cat is to **be aware** of kitty's normal condition, both physical and mental, and to **be observant** of any sudden changes. This awareness can be accomplished by routinely examining your cat so that he is accustomed to your touching every area of his body, from head to toe. Then, keep your eyes open for the warning signs of impending aggression.

Intimate knowledge of your cat will forestall many potential problems, both physical and behavioral.

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