

Teach Your Kitten How to Play Nice

A kitten's life is all about play, and play is all about prey. Soon after they open their eyes and hoist themselves up on their teeny paws, kittens start to play. But if you look closely, you'll notice that you have an itty-bitty hunter in your house.

Learning to play nice

A kitten's first playmates are his mother and littermates, and from them he learns how to inhibit his bite. A kitten who is separated from his family too early may not have learned that lesson well enough and doesn't know when to stop. Acceptable behavior can quickly escalate.

In addition, if people use their hands and/or 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 playing with your kitten evolves from peek-a-boo to professional wrestling in a matter of seconds, 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 wrong message.
- Use a toy when playing with her. Drag a toy, preferably a fishing pole-type toy that keeps your hands from kitty's mouth and claws, along the floor to encourage your kitten to pounce on it, or throw a toy for her to chase.
- Give your kitten something to wrestle with, like a soft stuffed animal that's about her size, so she can grab it with both front feet, bite it, and kick it with her back feet. This is one of the ways kittens play with each other, especially when they're 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.
- Don't hit or yell at your kitten when she nips or pounces. This will only make her fearful of you and she may start to avoid you. The idea is to train her, not punish her.

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 dad but not with the baby.

Equip yourself with the right training tools: [toys, toys, toys](#), and a water pistol.

A gnawing problem

As we said, you shouldn't let your kitten play with your body parts. But if you're petting her and she starts gnawing on you, immediately say "uh-uh" and carefully take your hands away. Give her a toy



to play with instead, but be sure she's not gnawing on you when you give her a toy or she'll think she's being rewarded for gnawing. Don't try to pet her again until she's tuckered out and no longer tempted to "kill" your hand.

Gimmie that!

Kittens always seem to want to play with whatever you're using—knitting needles, pencil, telephone antenna. If yours starts "attacking" your utensils, sharply say "uh-uh" to disrupt her behavior. Then give her one of her own toys. Be sure she's not attacking when you give her a toy or she'll think she's 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 she doesn't pounce, praise her with "Good kitty." If she does pounce, use your sharp "uh-uh" to distract her and interrupt her behavior. And offer her an acceptable toy. Be sure she's not pouncing on you when you provide the toy or she'll think she's being rewarded for pouncing.

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 her to calm down. If you pick her up to put her in another room, then you're rewarding her by touching her, 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, serious, and safe play sessions.

Adapted from material originally developed by applied animal behaviorists at the Dumb Friends League, Denver, Colorado. All rights reserved.

