Feline Aggression - VT VMA - Feb 2023

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Feline Social Structure
- Highly variable
- Solitary hunters
- Can adapt to living in large groups when food is readily available
- Hierarchy in feral colonies determined by body size in females and age in males

Why are Cats Social?
- Temperature regulation
- Kitten care
- Mutual defense

Territories
- Males have larger territories, which they mark by urine spraying.
- Females have smaller territories – usually encompassed by male’s territory.
- Cats may sleep together but spend active hours alone.
- Female groups are stable; interlopers are rejected.

Day in the Life of a Feral Cat
- Sleep = 40%
- Rest = 22%
- Groom = 15%
- Hunt = 15%
- Travel = 3%
- Eat = 2%

Day in the Life of a House Cat
- Sleep = 60%
- Rest = 25%
- Groom = 10%
- Play = 1%
- Travel = 1%
- Eat = 3%
Feline Aggression

- In a feral colony, cats who don’t get along avoid each other and use time-sharing to access common resources.
- In a home, cats are less able to avoid each other due to limited space, which can lead to aggression.

Feline Aggression

- Threatening or harmful behavior directed toward another individual or group

Medical Causes of Aggression

- Painful conditions
  - Abscesses
  - Arthritis
- Feline ischemic encephalopathy
- Brain tumors (Meningioma)
- Hyperthyroidism
- Hepatic encephalopathy

Feline Aggression

Categories

- Play / predatory
- Fear
- Petting-induced
- Status
- Territorial
- Re-directed

Play Aggression

- Very common problem, especially in young cats
- Usually directed toward moving stimuli (feet)
- May be directed only to certain members of the household
- Cat approaches victim
  - Silent stalking
  - Focused stare
  - Tail twitching
  - Crouching
  - Pouncing
• History
  − Using hands or feet to play with the cat
  − Inadequate opportunity for acceptable play

• Can result in serious injury
  − Deep bite wounds
  − Serious scratches
  − Often frightening to victim

Play Aggression Treatment
• Provide and encourage daily opportunities for acceptable “chase and attack” behaviors.

• Interactive toys
  − Cat dancers
  − Fishing rod toys

• Avoid situations that elicit the behavior
  − Enter via a different door
  − Don’t engage in behaviors that appear to elicit play aggression

• Avoid physical punishment
  − Cat may become fearful and defensively aggressive

• Interrupt behavior
  − Clap hands
  − Call cat’s name (in a “happy” voice)

• Anticipate attacks and redirect play
  − Have toys readily available to distract cat when in a playful mood

• Cat trees or condos
• Companion cats
• Food puzzles

Fear Aggression
• Cat perceives someone or something as a threat
• Can quickly escalate to aggression if cat is unable to escape

• Ears flattened
• Body lowered; legs tucked under body
• Tail tucked underneath
• Pupils dilated  
• Hissing, spitting, growling

• Early experience  
• History of punishment or poor socialization  
• Can occur in any cat  
  – Any age, breed, sex

• Genetic predisposition  
• If behavior results in retreat of the threat, the aggression is reinforced

**Fear Aggression Treatment**  
• Identify stimuli and threshold for fear

  **Counterconditioning**  
  – Changing an animal’s emotional response to a stimulus

  **Desensitization**  
  – Controlled exposure to stimuli below threshold for fear  
  – GRADUALLY increase intensity of stimuli

• Drug therapy  
  – SSRI  
  – TCA  
  – (Buspirone)

• Pheromones  
  – Feliway® Optimum  
  – Feliway® Multicat

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**Petting-Induced Aggression**  
• After a certain amount of petting, cat becomes aggressive  
• May actively seek attention from owners  
• Very frustrating to owners

**Petting-Induced Aggression Treatment**  
• Determine petting threshold  
• Reward with a treat for tolerating petting (stopping before threshold is reached)  
• Gradually increase time spent petting
• Pet cat *only* during re-training sessions
• Pet only or predominantly on the head and neck
• Watch for pre-aggression cues
  – Fidgeting
  – Tail twitching
  – Tensing
  – Skin twitching
  – Ears turning back or flattening
  – Low growling

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**Status Aggression**
• Cat bites or attacks owners or other cats in order to control a situation or resource
• Controls access to furniture or other resources
• Assertive, pushy behavior
• May bite when petted too long

**Status Aggression Treatment**
• Avoid situations that trigger aggression
• Owner must control all resources and initiate all interactions
  – Teach cat to sit on a mat on command
  – Reward cat *only* when sitting on mat
• Use commands and rewards to remove cat from furniture
• Reward cat for accepting handling

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**Territorial Aggression**
• Aggression towards visitors or other cats to expel them from the cat’s territory
• Seeks out victim
• Approaches and lunges even if victim stands still or walks away

**Territorial Aggression Treatment**
• Confine cat when people visit
• Avoid adopting another cat
• Block view of outside cats to avoid re-directed aggression
• Counterconditioning and desensitization to people and household cats
• Prevention – separation period when introducing a new cat

Redirected Aggression
• Occurs when the cat is aroused and cannot reach the intended target
• An innocent bystander (another cat or person) becomes the victim
• Very acute, intense, and uninhibited
• Triggers
  – Sight, sound, or odor of another cat
  – Sight, sound, or odor of another animal
  – Loud noises
  – Unfamiliar people
  – Unfamiliar environments
  – Pain

Redirected Aggression Treatment
• Do NOT try to handle the cat
• Identify and remove stimuli for arousal
  – Close curtains to block view of outside cats
  – Remove odor of other cats
  – Keep people and cats away until cat calms
• Confine cat to a quiet, darkened room
• Make take several days for cat’s arousal level to diminish

Treatment of Acute, Serious Feline Aggression
• Isolate cat in quiet, darkened room
• Assess every few hours; bring tasty food
• To take cat to veterinarian, put cardboard box over cat and slide cookie sheet underneath

Inter-Cat Aggression
• May be territorial, fear-related, redirected, pain-induced, or hormonally-related
• May occur after change in social group or to the environment
• Common when first introducing cats
Treatment of Inter-Cat Aggression

- Separate
- Medicate – if necessary
  - Buspirone for victim
  - SSRI or TCA for aggressor
- Odor exchange
  - Rub each cat with same towel
  - Feliway®
- Re-introduce gradually (weeks to months)
- Give aggressor smaller or less desirable place of confinement
- Give victim larger, more desirable place

Social Groups

- Determine number of social groups within home
  - Which cats engage in allogrooming and / or interact amicably?
- Provide equal but separate essential resources for each group

Treatment of Inter-Cat Aggression

- Instruct owners on feline threats
  - Stares
  - Posture
- Interrupt threats
- Bells on aggressor as warning to victim

Reintroduction

- At least 1 week of total separation (behind a closed door)
- Provide each cat with necessary and desired resources (food, water, litter boxes, beds, perches, etc.)
- Rotate confinement areas / odor exchange
- Feed cats on opposite side of door, but far enough apart that both cats will eat
- After 3-5 days without any sign of fear or aggression (e.g., no growling, hissing, caterwauling, etc.), move dishes a few inches closer to door
- Gradually move dishes closer every 3-5 days until can eat next to door
• When cats can eat next to door, begin decreasing the barrier every 5-7 days:
  – E.g., stack two baby gates in doorway and cover with a heavy blanket → light blanket → bed sheet → begin to raise sheet a couple inches every 5-7 days

• When cats can eat adjacent to just baby gate barrier, allow cats to eat meals in same room (keep separated otherwise)

• Decrease distance between food dishes gradually until cats can eat right next to one another

• Gradually increase time that cats are together after meals

• Alternatively, have cats on opposite ends of room; both cats or only aggressor in a carrier or tethered on a harness

• Proceed as before:
  – After 3-5 days of cats eating with no sign of aggression (e.g., no growling, hissing, caterwauling, etc.), feed an inch closer
  – Continue until cats can eat right next to one another

• Ensure adequate availability of resources for each cat
  – Perches and hiding areas
  – Food
  – Litter boxes

• *Important for cats to have positive experiences during all exposures to each other*