



Cat Aggression - Is She Really a 'Bad Mama'? Or is She Just a 'Scare-dy Cat'

By Robert Gallegos

Wikipedia describes aggression this way:

"In psychology, as well as other social and behavioral sciences, aggression refers to behavior between members of the same species that is intended to cause pain or harm."

So, right away we can eliminate the term 'aggression' when we encounter a cat that shows a ferocious hiss if we come to close. Obviously, one of us is not a cat. But, what does it mean when we are quietly petting our cat and she suddenly turns, grabs the hand that pets her and sinks her teeth into it? Surely, that's a form of aggression; even if we aren't members of the same species. Getting away from definitions and such, what we really want to know is why does a cat show what is definitely a behavior that says "get away and don't touch me!!", or what many term as cat aggression.

First of all it is helpful to not confuse cat aggression with the kind of aggression that's found in people. People are complex entities that are driven by many things, such as emotions, belief systems, family ties, the "seven deadly sins", the boss's moods or the NFL on Sundays. People are able to pass their aggressive nature around like the common cold infecting those around them, especially when inspired by a call to action for a certain cause (think half-time in the locker room). We can even turn it on and off, if and when we want to. That same Wikipedia definition goes on to state that some psychologists draw a direct relationship between low IQ and aggressive behavior; those towards the higher end of the IQ spectrum are more likely to be termed as assertive. But, our purpose here is not to split hairs between aggressive and assertive human personalities.

In animals the aggressive side of their personality is usually linked to certain and specific situations. Here it is helpful to note the difference between cat aggression and the predatory nature of cats. Certainly, when cats demonstrate the stalking, chasing, capturing and killing of prey they are showing a very distinctive quality of aggression. This type of aggression is called goal oriented aggression. Cats hunt in order to provide food for themselves, and in some cases, their kittens. Even when your cat brings home a field mouse and presents it to you, she is acting out a eons old instinct, although she may not know what to do with her catch. Cats will hunt, quite often for their entire life, while at the same time they are well fed and cared for by their owner. Maybe this is just cats showing they can be assertive, too.

Most all other forms of cat aggression are known as defensive aggression. These kinds of cat aggression characteristics can be directly attributed to three aspects of the nature of cats:

- The Territorial Nature of Cats
- The Maternal Instincts of Cats
- The Degree of Socialization of Kittens

Cats mark (define) their territory with scent marks that tell all others that this is her land. She will defend that territory against all other cats. Notice I say 'all other cats'. She will confront and chase away all uninvited cats vigorously. Other animals, including people, she may or may not confront, depending on whether she feels threatened. Predators may get a free pass as she lowers her head, with eyes dilated, and



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becomes as unobtrusive as possible. But other cats will get a very unwelcome confrontation and generally will respect what she is telling them, including avoiding her territory in the future. Or at least, if they have to, they'll cross her territory very cautiously (isn't it amazing how swift a cat can be, yet when called for they can move in the slo-motion that TV sports analysts would admire?).

The only invited guests she'll entertain are any males that respond to her caterwauling when she comes into heat. "Invited" guests may be a little misleading. Complete strangers can show up and the result is a ritual to determine who the best mate is will ensue. This will include fighting and growling in single elimination scraps until a victor is determined. Even then a female cat might mate with the second or third place finisher in addition to the winner. It's all so very uncivilized and unladylike. But, when she's mated all those boys had better watch out. They'll all be chased off so that she can bear her kittens in well deserved peace and solitude.

After the kittens are born, there is even more reason to demonstrate her territorial cat aggression. Not only does she have to protect her territory and the food it supplies, but she has to offer protection to her young brood. Cats have very strong maternal instincts and she will face the fiercest threat to her kittens head-on. And, if the predatory threat is too strong for her, she will distract it into chasing her so she can lead it away from the kittens den.

Cat aggression is also linked to the experiences cats had when they were a kitten. Everything your cat knows, she learned when she was a kitten. When kittens have positive experiences while they are young, the more likely they will accept those encounters when they are grown. If kittens have a bad encounter with unfriendly people or other pets, or their kitten-hood is over-protective and they don't have the opportunity to have a lot of experiences, they can grow into shy, withdrawn adult cats. This socialization of kittens is the process of allowing them a well-rounded introduction to the things that make up her world. Cats are smart enough to know what poses a danger and what is not a threat. A kitten who was introduced to a friendly dog will grow up not being threatened by dogs in general. But, she will know when a dog isn't being friendly, she shouldn't stick around to find out why.

This kind of cat aggression is based in fear. Cats are most comfortable in familiar surroundings and familiar faces. Those things and images she has not been positively socialized with will cause her to be reclusive and even afraid of. That's why kitten socialization is so important. One can see why feral cats especially will show aggressive growling and hissing towards anyone or thing outside of their colony brethren. Probably though, one won't get close enough to cause such a reaction unless she perceives imminent danger.

When it comes to 'biting the hand that pets you', a different kind of cat aggression needs to be defined. Let's call it personal space aggression. In addition to the the territory your cat calls her own, there is an area that surrounds her physical body she considers her personal space. Just like people, she will only allow certain individuals to intrude into that personal space. Further, this space can expand or collapse depending on her mood. Kinda like people. As her provider, she will allow you closer than others. If strangers were allowed to handle her when she was a kitten, she will be friendly to them as an adult. The puppy she grew up with will enjoy the same liberties. Few others will be allowed that same degree of closeness. Even then it comes with a set of unwritten rules. Generally speaking, she will be the one to determine if



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and when anyone is allowed into her personal space. Including the puppy she grew up with.

If she's quietly lying on your lap and you're gently stroking her, there are a few things that can cause her to want you to stop. You may be irritating a sore spot with your petting. She may be aroused sexually and really not be interested at that particular moment. Or she just may grow tired of being stroked. In any case, she'll show signs of irritation when she's finished with the session and you should take note of them. Her ears will lie back against her head, her eyes will dilate and she will stare at the source of her irritation, namely your hand. That's when it's time to stop and go get a treat, just to stay on her good side.

All these forms of cat aggression: goal oriented, defensive or personal space, can cross over each other and blend into the creature you know as your cat. Broken down they help with the understanding of why a cat shows aggressive behavior, but they all work together in the real world and define a part of a cat's personality. One thing to remember is for you to not take cat aggression personally. Cat aggression is closely linked to a specific reaction to a cat's interpretation of a negative element in her environment. I imagine that if she were in the locker room at half-time, she would be hiding in the corner wondering 'what the heck is wrong with those guys?'

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Robert is a life long lover of cats. He is dedicated to sharing his understanding of the cat experience, reducing the epidemic feral cat situation, and helping cat lovers to provide the best care for their cats.

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