

Playing detective...

A day in the life of a cat behaviour counsellor



When cats attack! – the truth about cat aggression to humans.

Vicky Halls investigates...

A recent BBC news item reported the details of a 911-emergency call in Portland, Oregon. Apparently, a couple and their dog were under siege after their 10kg cat had scratched their seven-month-old son. After the man hit the cat it allegedly “retaliated” and they took refuge in their bedroom. The cat was described as “very, very, very, very hostile” with “a history of violence”. I was subsequently asked to speak on local BBC radio programmes (as I am sure were many of my colleagues) to reassure the general public that our pets are not becoming a danger to humanity. The highly emotive language in this account and the slightly hysterical extrapolation to the wider cat population has compelled me to put the record straight.

So here is the reality of the situation:

Aggression is not a personality trait but rather a consequence of an emotional state. Cats are normally only aggressive towards humans for a reason: mostly they are terrified and feel their lives are at risk, they are under enormous social pressure or they are sick. The ‘aggression’ we see in our pets is commonly not aggression at all but misdirected or enthusiastic predatory or social play behaviour. They just happen to have sharp teeth and claws but *no* malevolent intent.

Normal ‘aggression’ of this kind is relatively predictable and, if the cat’s needs are met, can be resolved with some good behavioural advice. Abnormal aggression however is less predictable, not appropriate to the context and more complicated to address. It is also extremely rare.

Vicky Halls is a registered Veterinary Nurse, a member of the International Cat Care’s Feline Behaviour Expert Panel and author of several best-selling cat counselling books. For more information about these books or if you have any concerns about your own cat’s behaviour please visit her website: www.vickyhalls.net



What can we do to stop cats from being aggressive?

We have a duty of care to our pet cats that goes beyond putting a roof over their heads interspersed with us stroking, feeding and generally having fun. An optimum level of care includes finding out about the species and establishing what lifestyle best suits the needs of this highly evolved predatory animal. This is after all a relationship that has to work for both parties.

Probably the first step to preventing aggressive behaviour is to follow the 10 Golden Rules.

10 Golden rules

1. Domestic cats need to be socialised with humans in a positive way from the age of two to eight weeks so that they become accustomed to our behaviour and learn to tolerate our very non-feline ways
2. We also need to accept that genes play a role in how cats respond to us, so breeding from cats with a long lineage of companion animals limits the chances of aggression occurring
3. Kittens need to learn acceptable behaviour during play so drawing blood from owners’ hands and feet is not acceptable. Playing with fishing rod toys and stuffed mice toys ensures that kittens learn the appropriate target for these games
4. Generally speaking, it is best to allow a cat to initiate contact and to keep reciprocal physical contact brief, concentrating on the forehead, cheeks and chin – at least until you know the cat well enough to appreciate what level of attention it will tolerate and enjoy. Allow the cat to determine the quality and quantity of interaction that takes place
5. All cats need stimulation, especially indoor only cats. Remember they are predatory creatures so require an outlet for the ‘adrenaline high’ that comes from pouncing on and catching a mouse. Some cats just can’t take the lack of excitement
6. Shouting at or striking a cat is not an option – the cat will become extremely fearful and if it cannot escape may feel it needs to fight to stay alive. Even direct eye contact can be challenging

7. Changes in patterns of behaviour may be a sign of illness and if a cat feels vulnerable then defensive aggression may be shown. *Always ensure your cat visits the vet for a check-up if this is a cause of concern*
8. Give some cats an inch and they will take a mile! Be sympathetic to a cat's needs but don't feel you have to do everything 24/7 on command. A small minority of cats learn to use aggressive posturing and facial expressions to get what they want when they want it. This can lead to particularly compliant owners becoming the victim of psychological pressure from their cats. A healthy degree of 'neglect' and a few house rules can turn this dysfunctional and stressful relationship into something far more appealing for both parties
9. Don't reassure a cat if he sees another cat outside and cannot get to it. At this point his body is preparing for a fight and if you touch the cat, or make a sound, a 'red mist' may descend and the cat may redirect this attack onto you
10. Always allow a cat an escape route, especially if he is wary of approaches or nervous of strangers. It is a natural instinct to flee from danger and if you block his exit then this could result in a fearful cat becoming aggressive

Spotting the warning signs

If you see any of the following signs then it is best to turn away and not pursue any physical contact. The cat doesn't want to attack you unless you absolutely force it to do so by ignoring its signals and continuing your approach.

- Dilated pupils, direct staring
- Thrashing/twitching tail
- Hissing, growling or spitting
- The ears flattened against the side of the head or rotated backwards
- Crouched or tense body posture

And if this advice has come a little too late...

If you are the victim of aggressive behaviour then the first priority is safety and prevention of further injury by separating the cat from any humans or other animals. Your cat may be very frightened too so keeping as calm as possible will help to reduce the likelihood of a reoccurrence. Never block your cat's escape or attempt to retaliate, confront or punish – this will definitely make the situation worse (see Golden Rules No 6 & 10).

Once the cat is secure, and any wounds* are treated, contact your veterinary practice to discuss the behaviour. If you need to approach your cat for any reason after the attack then it would be advisable to wear protective clothing, such as gloves and boots. This will probably not be necessary but it may make you feel a little more confident to be around your cat while he is in this mood. Ideally,

unless the veterinary surgeon advises otherwise, you should leave your cat for several hours to give him time to 'wind down' from such a highly aroused state. At some stage, careful assessment is necessary by your veterinary surgeon who may, if appropriate, refer you to a behaviour specialist.

I cannot possibly comment on the specific circumstances behind the incident in Portland, Oregon. I understand that the scratch to the baby's forehead was superficial. I truly hope that the family received good behavioural support and advice and that all is now well. ●

**Always seek medical attention after a cat bite, particularly if you experience any swelling, redness, pain, fever or headaches.*

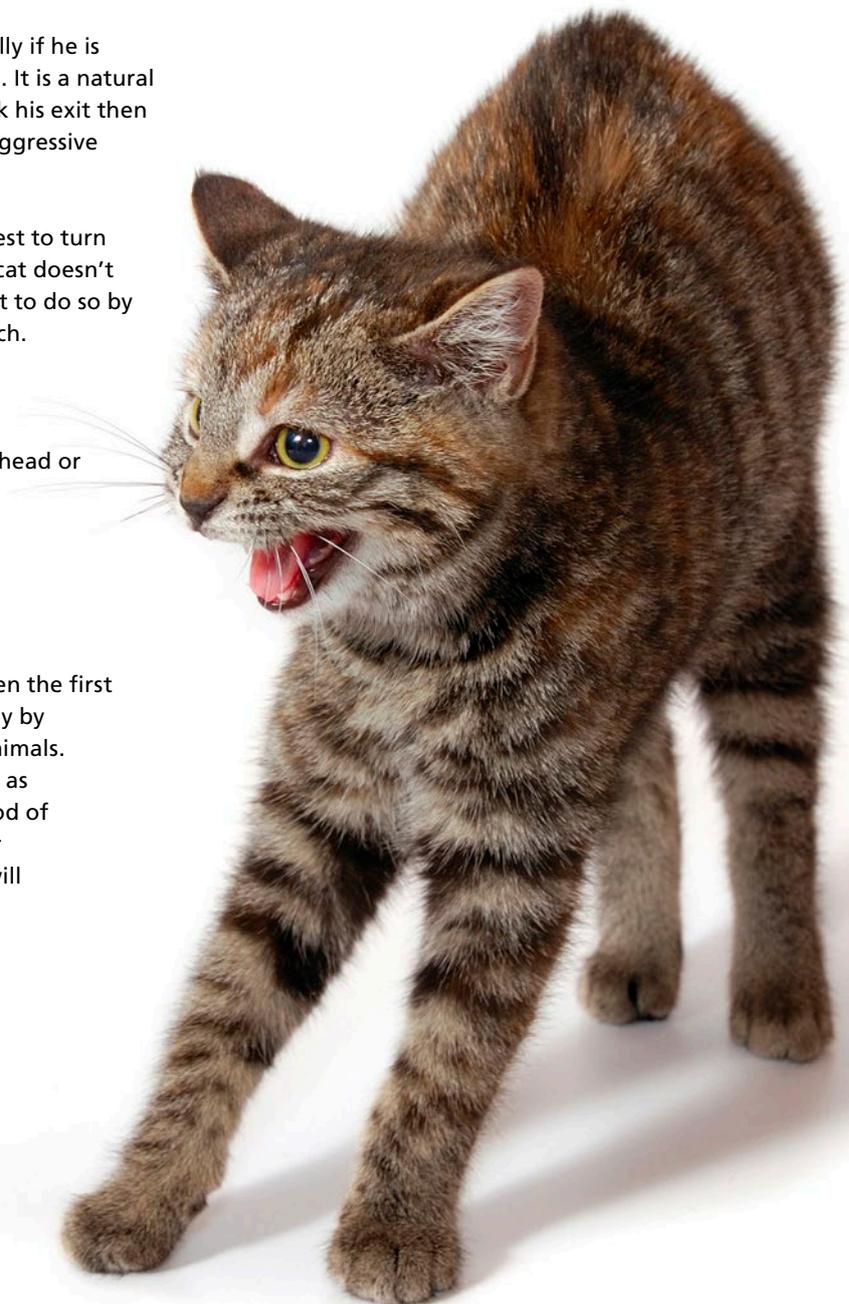


Photo: iStock.com/qbanzyk