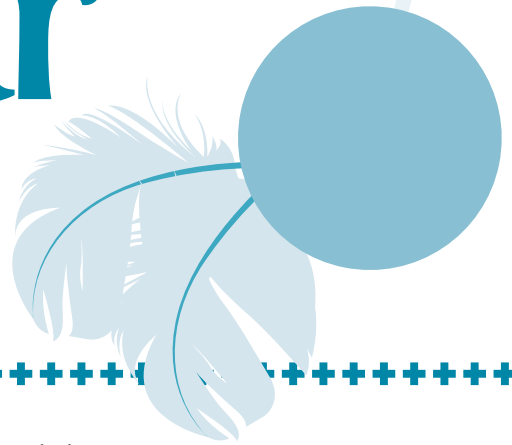


Behaviour matters



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With Nicky Trevorrow it's finger wagging to finger play

It can be terribly exciting getting a new kitten. They are so playful and there is a whole variety of games to play with them. Invariably, they may end up mouthing at fingers or chasing toes under the duvet. It does not really hurt and it is all part of the fun, isn't it? Surely it doesn't harm anyone? Or does it? This article will look at what kittens are really learning when we play games with our fingers.

Kittens learn a huge amount about their environment around them and well as social interactions which is particularly heightened during the kitten socialisation period. In these first two months of life, they take in information from their various senses about what is considered 'normal'. This is why it is so crucial that kittens experience a range of positive experiences from different household sounds like the vacuum cleaner, and a variety of social interactions with at least four different people across a range of ages. These experiences form nerve pathways in the brain and the nerve pathways are strengthened through repeating the positive

experiences during this period. The result is that the effects of kitten socialisation, such as sociability towards people, can persist throughout life.

Learning to play

Kittens start to play properly from about four to five weeks of age, often batting objects while they are still quite wobbly on their feet. They engage in various different sorts of games from:

- 'Mouse' – batting small objects, leaping onto it while doing acrobatics
- 'Bird' – jumping up and catching flying objects and bringing them into the mouth
- 'Rabbit' – ambushing larger objects or litter mates and practising the 'kill bite' often raking with the back legs

The whole process of play from first spotting the toy to catching it and 'killing' it, releasing endorphins or 'happy hormones' so cats and kittens feel good when playing. By actively engaging kittens in these different sorts of games rather than one type, they are potentially more likely to enjoy different games later in life. Some adult cats do seem to have a preferred 'play style' of the toy moving in the air or along the ground.

Kittens also learn a great deal through social play with their siblings and mother. They can be seen to adopt various play postures and movements at different times:

- 21-23 days – 'belly up' and 'stand up' play postures
- 32 days – 'side step' play posture
- 33-35 days – pouncing
- 35 days – stalking and back arching
- 38-41 days – chasing
- 43 days – wrestling
- 48 days – 'face off' posture



Photo: Sue Shermitt

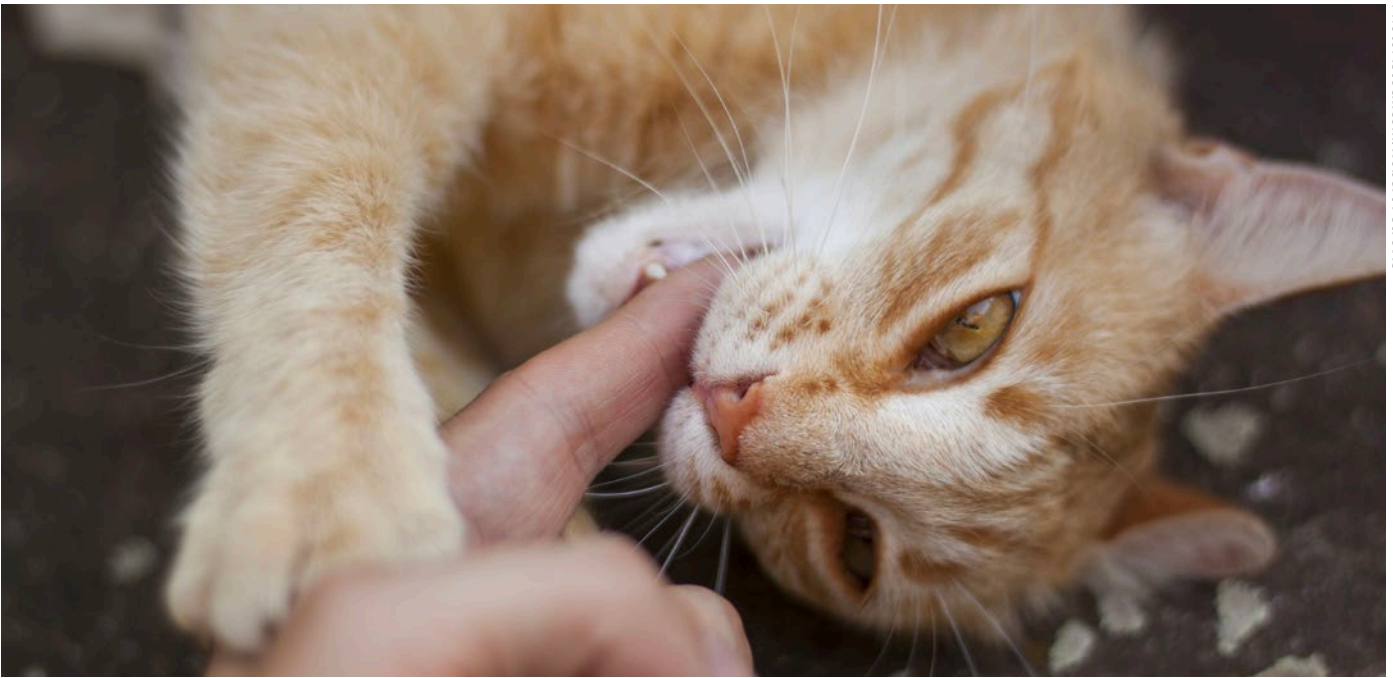


Photo: istock.com/Robert Petrowic

The postures range from hunting style behaviours to cat-to-cat conflict behaviour with the 'face off' posture where one kitten will stare intensely at another kitten, similar to the way adults cats do when they are too close to one another and experiencing conflict. Play benefits kittens by improving their physical fitness, helps the kitten become more independent, practise behaviours such as hunting skills, aids co-ordination, and enables them to explore their environment.

Fingers and toes are not toys!

Most people have at some point played games with kittens using their fingers and toes. While it can seem like innocent fun, we are teaching kittens that this is a normal and acceptable way to interact with people. The difficulty comes when the kitten grows into an adult cat with sharper teeth and claws. Adult cats refine their play skills and develop 'ambushing' behaviour into the mix – where the cat hides behind an object at the top of the stairs, crouched down in a 'hunting style' posture and suddenly rushes out at the unsuspecting owner's ankles! It hurts! From the owner's perspective, this behaviour can appear to be out of the blue and many will interpret this behaviour as 'unprovoked aggression', whereas when we look at it from the cat's perspective, this is simply a fun game that it was taught as a kitten.

So what can be done about a kitten or cat that is showing this inappropriate play behaviour? Firstly, prevention is key! It is important to be aware of your hands at all times to prevent kittens having the opportunity to bite or play with fingers and toys. Providing kittens with frequent play sessions using appropriate toys and games will teach kittens what constitutes as appropriate play items. It is worth noting that this needs to be applied to all friends and family visiting the kitten who may be tempted to use their fingers and toes.

For an adult cat already showing inappropriate play behaviour, a health check by the vet to rule out medical reasons specifically for the behaviour is the first port of call. Once the cat has a clean bill of health, there are ways to address it.

While some people may be tempted to tell the cat off for seemingly attacking their ankles or grabbing at hands, this will not solve anything and may in fact make the problem worse. Remember that the cat feels this is a fun game and does not understand that their attention is unwanted. Anything negative is likely to deteriorate the relationship between the cat and the owner, and the cat may develop other behavioural problems due to stress and conflict.

Human health and safety must be considered first, so ensure that all members of the household wear thick protective clothing and boots. This has the added bonus of making people feel more confident to walk calmly and smoothly around the house, knowing their legs are safe! If the cat does make a mad dash for the legs, then staying perfectly still and quiet will stop the game from being fun from the cat's point of view. At this point, introduce a previously stashed fishing rod toy to entice the cat away from your legs and redirect the play behaviour onto something more suitable. It can be easier to have another member of the household produce a fishing rod toy to play with the cat while you stand still.

Have regular structured play and fuss sessions throughout the day so the cat gets used to the predictable routine for attention and interaction. Cats thrive on novelty and variety when it comes to play so invent different games and have a toy box stored out of the cat's reach whereby toys are rotated. Fishing rod toys such as Da Bird or Flying Frenzy are particularly good as they have especially long rods to keep fingers at a safe distance from the play. This approach needs to be followed consistently by everyone in the household until the cat learns that fingers and toes are boring and fishing rod toys are much more fun!

If you are experiencing problems, please seek help sooner rather than later as it may be easier to resolve a recently developed problem than one which has existed for some time. Speak with your vet for further advice who may recommend referral to a suitably qualified behaviourist, such as a member of the Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors (www.apbc.org.uk). ●