



## OVERSTIMULATION & PETTING AGGRESSION

This is a cat's normal response to petting or handling which the cat finds uncomfortable or feels has gone on too long. A majority of cats exhibit over stimulation or petting aggression to some degree. However, cats vary enormously as to the extent to which they like petting or handling and for how long they tolerate these without finding it aversive. They also vary greatly in the number of warning signals and intensity of their resulting aggressive reaction if warning signals are not seen, or ignored.

- The first thing to keep in mind is that it is very important to avoid getting the cat to the point where it is over stimulated or irritated. Even if you feel okay with the aggressive behavior, it is still quite stressful to the cat. It also reinforces the biting behavior habit and may increase aggressive incidents and/or intensity, possibly due to the kitty feeling less trustful of the person pushing them. So, for example, if you know the cat may get over stimulated after about 5 minutes of petting, then only pet the cat for 4 minutes. Or, if you know the cat doesn't like to be petted a certain way or in a particular area, avoid doing so as much as possible. After a while you can increase petting time a little and see how well the cat tolerates it.
- Observe for signs of impending aggression. Cats almost always give warning signals before biting or scratching. Cats are very subtle in their body posturing by nature, so these signals are sometimes difficult to pick up on at first. Common signals include: tail swishing or flicking, ears flat, staring, quick head turn to watch your hand as you pet, pupillary dilation, stillness or tenseness, low growl, and walking away and lying down. Note that re-directed aggression can also be a reason for biting, so pay attention to environmental triggers such as loud noises, animals and people present, other cat smells, and changes in the environment.
- Interrupt behavior at the first sign of any of these signals by withdrawing attention. You can do this by just keeping your hands still by your sides. If the cat is very upset you may want to walk away from the cat, or if on your lap, stand up slowly and let the cat gently slide off.
- Wait before attempting to pet again. Some cats only take a few minutes to settled down, others can take hours, even a day or two if very upset. At least give a 10 second break. Make sure that all signals of irritation have stopped. If the cat is still worked up, switch to playtime with quiet interactive toys such as
- Feather toys, or string. This can help relieve anxiety for the cat, while still allowing you to interact.
- If the cat does nip or scratch during over stimulation, use verbal correction such as telling the cat "no" or "ouch", or you can blow in the cat's face lightly. Correction



should only be enough to stop the aggressive action. It should never scare or frighten the cat and cause it to run away. If this happens, say the correction more quietly, or blow in the cat's face more softly. A correction that is too harsh may cause the cat to become fearful of you. This can increase the frequency and intensity of the biting behavior.

- Keep in mind that correction won't have an immediate impact. Some cats take months or even a year or more to show changes in their behavior. Realistic expectations are that the biting incidents will occur less frequently, and eventually with less intensity. Initially this will be due to watching for signals of irritation, but eventually this may change because of a building of trust and lack of reinforcement. However, most cats will still exhibit this behavior to some degree for their entire lives.

The prognosis for this type of behavior in a home situation is good. In many instances, if the cat has the freedom to get away from a situation that is over stimulating him, he will choose to do that instead of aggress. The following will help in behavior modification:

- No young children.
- The ability to read the cat's body language/ willingness (on the part of the human) to learn. An understanding of basic cat behavior.
- Ability to accept limitations to petting and the patience to not push the cat to accept more than he can take.



If you have further questions, please phone the SF/SPCA Cat Behavior Helpline at (415) 554-3075 or email [catbehavior@sfspca.org](mailto:catbehavior@sfspca.org)