

# a new outlook on aggression

The **LATEST SCHOOL OF THOUGHT** on dealing with cats behaving badly: Consider the animal's natural instincts.

**I REALIZED HOW** bad things were when my rescue kitten Tufa had a small chunk of flesh chomped out of her tail. My older cat, Mungo, was clearly the perp. She had been gunning for Tufa and her brother, Philippe, since their arrival, and in a demonic hissy fit, Mungo had even attacked my arm, leaving wounds that oozed for days.

According to pet-aggression experts, I had done everything wrong. Apparently there is a new approach to pet aggression, which kicks the idea of the “alpha” to the curb. Instead of letting my cats duke it out, I should have introduced them gradually, says Nicholas Dodman, head of the Animal Behavior Department at Tufts University's Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine. To overcome territo-

riality, cats need to be kept in separate rooms, sometimes for weeks, and then slowly allowed to peek at each other through a screen or play with each other's paws under a door—a process Dodman calls systemic desensitization. When they're eventually permitted in the same room together, it should be under your supervision and for something pleasurable, such as food or catnip, that they will learn to associate with each other.

Feline aggression can come from fear (as in, “Who are these interlopers in my bed?”), but it can also be rooted in predatory hunting instincts. Work with those natural impulses, says Katherine Houpt, emeritus professor of behavior medicine at Cornell University's College of Veterinary Medicine. “Cats' natural hunting times are early morning and at night,” Houpt says, “so those are great times for you to play with them.” Chase toys, such as the Cat Dancer, lasers, or fishing poles with feathers, help dissipate some of that hunting energy; five intense

minutes go a long way. Most of these techniques relieve aggression not just toward other cats but toward people, too.

High places, such as cat perches, can also provide refuge zones for the picked-on cat. If your house is big enough, let your cats claim independent spheres of influence. (At the very least, don't make them share a litter box—make sure they have more than one to choose from.) When all else fails, ask your vet about medication, and not just for the aggressor; antianxiety medication for the victim can break the cycle wherein the scaredy-cat bolts and the other cat instinctively pounces.

And yes, there is relative peace now. My cats eventually settled on a two-state solution, with mostly separate turf claims around my house. The catnip also worked miracles: Mungo may be picked up for public intoxication, but I think her days of aggravated assault are over.

## first impressions

*Pet expert Marc Morrone has three tips to keep the fur from flying when introducing an additional cat to your household. Listen to his weekly radio show Ask Marc, the Petkeeper, on SiriusXM Channel 110, Fridays at 8 P.M. EST.*

### SWITCH IT UP

As mentioned, cats should be kept in different rooms at first. To familiarize them slowly, swap the cats' rooms each day. This way, each cat will grow accustomed to the other's scent as they use common water bowls and litter boxes.

### GET GROOMING

Comb your cats separately, but use the same comb. This is another way to expose the felines to each other's scent. You should also have a groomer cut both cats' nails before they meet to reduce the possibility of scratching.

### PLAY REFEREE

Be prepared in case your pets do get in a brawl when they are introduced. Most cats hate water. A few squirts with a water bottle is usually enough to break things up without putting yourself in harm's way.

