

PROTOCOL FOR UNDERSTANDING AND TREATING REDIRECTED AGGRESSION IN CATS AND DOGS

Redirected aggression is more common in cats than it is in dogs, and it is often intensely serious. Redirected aggression occurs when one individual is thwarted in her access to some behavior in which she is attempting to engage, and she then responds by becoming aggressive toward the individual who thwarted her. There is no evidence that one sex of dog or cat is affected more often than the other.

The individual responsible for preventing or interrupting access to the behavior may have done so deliberately, but with consequences that were not anticipated. One example of redirected aggression involves the dog who is chasing the cat. The client stops the dog from chasing the cat and the dog redirects the aggression to the client. In such cases, where there are no physical barriers that thwart the continuation of the aggression, it is very important to distinguish true redirected aggression from an accidental bite. An accidental bite is one that occurs to a person or animal simply because they found themselves between fighting animals. In *accidental* bites, the biting cat or dog generally releases the person or other animals as soon as he realizes that he made a mistake. This is not true for redirected aggression, which may be quite fierce.

In situations where redirected aggression occurs, the individual responsible for preventing or interrupting access to the behavior may have done so inadvertently, and may not know of the interruption. For example, a playing dog could run through an interaction between two other dogs, disrupting it, and be grabbed by one of the dogs.

Redirected aggression can also occur when an inanimate object prevents access to the behavior in which the aggressor wishes to engage. The classic example of redirected aggression in cats involves two cats who are sitting in a window. Unknown to one of the cats, the other cat sees a third cat outside. Because the aroused cat cannot have access to the one that is outside and because this lack of access increases his agitation, he redirects his aggression to his housemate. *Redirected aggression involves both an aggressive response that is related to the social system AND—this is very important—the thwarted ability to resolve the “perceived” or actual social conflict.*

In redirected aggression, the animal acts as if “angry” at the individual who interrupted her behavior, and pursues this individual as the new victim of the aggression.

Because redirected aggression occurs relatively frequently in cats, this protocol is written primarily with cats in mind, but it can be easily adapted to dogs by applying the same principles and guidelines.

One of the key points of this protocol is to understand that the *victims* of redirected aggression can suffer a *profound decline in their quality of life*. This point is mentioned early because it is so important to understand that this is a complex condition and that everyone involved may require treatment.

Redirected aggression can be difficult to diagnose because the circumstances that precipitate it are not often witnessed. Accordingly, the people watching the redirected event, unless it is directed toward them, think that the primary problem is inter-animal (interdog or intercat) aggression.

Redirected aggression is potentially a *very* dangerous problem; the recipient of the aggression seldom anticipates it

and is usually traumatized by the aggression because it appears so out of context to them. Please remember that the trigger for redirected aggression may not be obvious or visible to the ultimate target of the aggression, worsening the situation. Using the example above, if the cat who is attacked was asleep, he did not see the third cat pass the window, and so now the attack on him seems completely random. Unexplained, seemingly random adverse outcomes are associated with profound behavioral trauma and helplessness.

Unfortunately, redirected aggression can be so contextually inappropriate, so unexpected, and so traumatic that the recipient of the aggression becomes instantly and intensely fearful of the aggressor. This aggression can change the entire social relationship structure in the household and cause the victim to hide and become withdrawn. If the aggressor has had a problem with the victim in the past, this provides a good opportunity to further victimize that individual. If the victim is a cat, full-blown intercat aggression can then develop. If the recipient of the redirected aggression fights back, fighting back can either start or exaggerate an already existent cycle of intercat aggression.

It is not necessary that the aggressor *continue* to be aggressive in order for the victim to be fearful; the context is so sudden and inappropriate that a recipient can learn to be fearful based on *one* exposure.

Similarly, the aggressor may, with only one experience, learn to associate his inability to pursue an individual or circumstance in which he was initially thwarted with the presence of the housemate. In this case, every time the aggressor sees the housemate, regardless of whether, for example, the outdoor cat is present, he experiences the same full-blown set of behaviors as when the initial event occurred. No wonder the feline housemate now hides from the aggressor!

Treatment of redirected aggression is very difficult. In addition to the checklist, below, you will need to employ all of the relevant procedures found in **Protocol for Understanding and Treating Feline Aggressions with an Emphasis on Intercat Aggression** and **Protocol for Understanding and Treating Dogs with Interdog Aggression**. Caution is critically important here. These animals are not acting normally and can injure another individual.

Tick List:

- 1. Identify the primary source of the cat’s or dog’s initial upset.
 - If your cats sit in the window, look outside for signs of an intruder cat (e.g., smells of urine, buried feces, paw prints, spraying against the window, nose prints on the glass, et cetera). Do anything you can to prevent the circumstances in which the initial aggression occurred from reoccurring (e.g., put a lace curtain in the window, ask your neighbors to keep their cat in).
 - If you know that the aggression has happened when the dog is “corrected” for chasing the cat, separate them so that the chase cannot happen. Try to ensure that the precipitating stimulus is eliminated from the behavioral environment.



The ideal situation that could precipitate redirected aggression: the inside cat could not directly respond to a threat by the outside cat, and if another cat was sitting nearby indoors, that third cat could be victimized by redirected aggression. (Photo courtesy of Anne Marie Dossche.)

- 2. Using closed doors and/or crates/gates that prohibit one pet from seeing the other, separate the individuals involved in the redirected aggression *when not supervised*. Make sure that the victim or recipient of the aggression has the most freedom to roam or to select a preferred resting spot.
- 3. Reward the aggressor for ignoring the victim. Praise him and/or use food treats.
- 4. Make sure that the victim has attention first and that each cat or dog gets 5 to 10 minutes of individual, calming attention (grooming, massage) alone each day.
- 5. Adhere to instructions in the **Protocol for the Introduction of a New Pet to Other Household Pets**. Start as if these two have never known each other.
- 6. Bell the aggressor (Bear Bells: www.rei.com) and watch him like a hawk. Interrupt the aggressor at the first signs of any aggression, including staring. If just the aggressor's presence seems to frighten the victim or recipient of the aggression, banish the aggressor. Try to make sure that the recipient sees you do this.
- 7. *Redirected aggression is so horrific for most cats and some dogs that each of the animals involved requires anti-anxiety medication*. In the case of redirected aggression in cats, the medications chosen for each cat are usually different because the sought-after effects are different (rendering one cat less fearful while rendering the other less reactive and aggressive). Remember that these medications are adjuvants to, *not substitutions for*, behavioral and environmental modification.
- 8. If after months of effort and compliance nothing is helping, please consider placing one of the dogs or cats in another home. This is a horrible condition to treat, it may have a high relapse rate, and it may be safer to place one of the pets in another home. Because the problem is wrapped up in a specific complex circumstance, finding a new home is a good option, because it totally alters the circumstance. If this is truly not an option, and it is understandable that it may not be, you can have these pets live completely separately in the same house with some serious effort.
- 9. If the patient involved in the redirected aggression is a dog, please remember that canine redirected aggression can be associated with impulse and control aggression. Please ensure that this is not also a problem, and if it is, treat it (see **Protocol for Impulse and Control Aggression**).