

Introducing Your New Cat to Other Pets



Wouldn't it be nice if all it took to introduce a new cat to your resident pet were a brief handshake and a couple of "Hello, my name is..." name-tags? Unfortunately, it's not quite that simple, which means you'll need to have some realistic expectations from the outset.

What are realistic expectations? First, it's recognizing and accepting that your pets may never be best buddies but will usually come to at least tolerate each other. Second, it's understanding the need to move slowly during the introduction process to increase your chances for success.

Some cats are more social than other cats. For example, an eight-year old cat who has never been around other animals may never learn to share their territory (and her people) with other pets in the household. But, an eight-week old kitten separated from her mother and littermates for the first time might be glad to have a cat or dog companion.

Cats are territorial, and they need to be introduced to other animals very slowly so they can get used to each other before a face-to-face confrontation. Slow introductions help prevent fearful and aggressive problems from developing. Here are guidelines to help make introductions go smoothly.

Confinement

Confine your new cat to one medium sized room with her litter box, food, water and a bed. Feed your resident pets and the newcomer on each side of the door to this room, so that they associate something enjoyable (eating!) with each other's smells. Gradually move the dishes closer to the door until your pets are eating calmly while standing directly on either side of the door.

The Old Switcheroo

Swap the sleeping blankets or beds used by all the cats so they each have a chance to become accustomed to the other cats' scents. You can even rub a towel on one animal and put it underneath the food dishes of another animal.

Once the new cat is using her litter box and eating regularly while confined, let her have free time in the house while confining your other animals to the new cat's room. This switch provides another way for the animals to experience each other's scents without a face-to-face meeting.

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It also allows the newcomer to become familiar with her new surroundings without being frightened by the other animals.

Next, after the animals have been returned to their original designated parts of the house, use two doorstops to prop open the dividing door just enough to allow the animals to see each other, and repeat the whole process over a period of days, supervised of course.

Try to keep your resident pets' schedules close to what they were before the newcomer's arrival. Before bringing a new pet home, check with your veterinarian to be sure all your current pets are healthy. You'll also want to have at least one litter box per cat in separate locations. Make sure none of the cats are being "ambushed" by another while trying to use the litter box and be sure each cat has a safe hiding place.

If small spats (hissing, growling or posturing) do occur between your cats, you shouldn't attempt to intervene directly to separate the cats. Instead, make a loud noise, throw a pillow or use a squirt bottle with water and vinegar to separate the cats. Give them a chance to calm down before reintroducing them to each other.

Cat-to-Dog Introductions

You'll need to be even more careful when introducing a dog and a cat to one another. A dog can seriously injure and even kill a cat very easily, even if they're only playing, all it takes is one quick shake to break the cat's neck.

Some dogs have such a high prey drive that they should never be left alone with a cat. Dogs usually want to chase and play with cats, and cats usually become afraid and defensive.

In addition to using the techniques described above to begin introducing your new cat to your resident dog, take these steps:

- ***Practice Obedience***

If your dog doesn't already know the commands "sit", "down", "come" and "stay", begin working on them right away. Small pieces of food will increase your dog's motivation to perform, which will be necessary in the presence of a strong distraction such as a new cat.

Even if your dog already knows these commands, work to reinforce these commands in return for a tidbit.

- ***Set Up Controlled Meetings***

After your new cat and resident dog have become comfortable eating on opposite sides of the door and have been exposed to each other's scents as described above, you can attempt a face- to-face introduction in a controlled manner.

Put your dog's leash on and have him either sit or lie down and stay for treats. Have a second person offer your cat some special pieces of food.

At first, the cat and the dog should be on opposite sides of the room. Lots of short visits are better than a few long visits. Don't drag out the visit so long that the dog becomes uncontrollable. Repeat this step several times until both the cat and dog are tolerating each other's presence without fear, aggression or other undesirable behaviors.

- ***Let Your Cat Go***

Next, allow your cat some freedom to explore your dog at her own pace, with the dog still on-leash and in a "down" position. Treat him for his calm behavior. If your dog gets up from his "stay" position, he should be repositioned with a treat lure and praised and rewarded for obeying the "stay" command. If your cat runs away or becomes aggressive, you're progressing too fast. Go back to the previous introduction steps.

- ***Use Positive Reinforcement***

Although your dog must be taught that chasing or being rough with your cat is unacceptable behavior, he must also be taught what is appropriate and be rewarded for those behaviors, such as sitting, coming when called, or lying down in return for a treat. If your dog is always punished when your cat is around and never has "good things" happen in the cat's presence, your dog may redirect aggression toward the cat.

- ***Directly Supervise All Interactions between Your Dog and Cat***

You may want to keep your dog at your side and on-leash whenever your cat is free in the house during the introduction process. Be sure that your cat has an escape route and a place to hide. Until you're certain your cat will be safe, be sure to keep the two separated when you aren't home.

Kittens and Puppies

Because they're so much smaller, kittens are in more danger of being injured or killed by a young energetic dog or by a predatory dog. A kitten will need to be kept separate from an especially energetic dog until she is fully grown, except for periods of supervised interaction to enable the animals to get to know each other.

Even after the cat is fully grown, she may not be able to be safely left alone with the dog. Usually, a well-socialized cat will be able to keep a puppy in his place, but some cats don't have enough confidence to do this. If you have an especially shy cat, you might need to keep her separated from your puppy until he matures enough to have more self-control.

When to Get Help

If introductions don't go smoothly, seek professional advice immediately from a veterinarian or animal-behavior specialist. Animals can be severely injured in fights and the longer the problem continues, the harder it can be to resolve. Punishment won't work and could make things worse. Luckily, most conflicts between pets in the same family can often be resolved with professional guidance.

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