

INTRODUCING YOUR NEW CAT TO FAMILY DOGS

You have decided to add a cat to your family and want to know how to introduce your dog to your new cat. Prior to adopting a new cat, you should consider both the personality and experiences of your dog and of the cat you are interested in.

Has your dog ever been around cats? How did he react? A good relationship with a previous cat is a good sign; however remember that your new cat will behave differently than your previous cat. To be safe you must assume your dog may want to injure your new cat, even if he's been friendly with other cats in the past. This is especially important if his history with cats is not known. Animals can learn to get along together the more familiar they are with one another. Your dog will be an unknown entity to your new cat, so the cat is likely to be leery of the dog.

Does your dog seem to adapt well to changes or does he become fearful or aggressive in new situations? If change is stressful for your dog, adding a cat may not be in his best interest. At the very least, you should plan on at least several weeks for the introduction process, during which time the animals must be constantly supervised or separated.

How about the cat you are going to adopt? Is he easy going and self confident? Has he been socialized to dogs, and is he friendly with them? To be safe you must assume your new cat will be fearful of your dog, even if he's been friendly with other dogs in the past. Your dog will be new to your cat, and the cat may not treat your dog the same as any dogs he was previously friendly with.

While you can expect most kittens to be more curious and less likely to be fearful of your dog than an adult cat might be, a rambunctious kitten can cause the dog to chase the kitten leading to fearfulness or attacks. Kittens can also frighten or irritate dogs with their persistent attempts to play. For the safety of the new kitten, she will need extra supervision around the dog.

Help the Relationship Get Off on the Right Paws

The initial introduction should be a positive experience for all the pets. Many cats will be frightened of your dog. Your dog's reaction could range from curious or playful (often inappropriately rough), to aggressive or predatory with the intent to hurt your new cat.

At all times, your over-riding concern must be your pets' safety. When your pets can't be supervised, they should be housed separately. Allow your pets to hear and smell each other at first, but not see each other. For example, confine your dog to one room or one level of your house when you first bring your new cat home. Allow your cat to explore his new "digs" while your dog is safely confined. Be sure your cat comes near your dog's beds, toys, etc. to sniff them.

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Ask your pet professional for more information about cat behavior.

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Keep the introductions
brief and enjoyable.

Your goal is to teach
your dog and cat how
to behave appropriately
around each other.

Take an old towel, rub it on your cat, and put it in the room where your dog is. This is the first step in accustoming your dog to your cat's presence. Note how interested he seems to be. If you have a hard time dragging your dog away from your cat's odors, imagine how intensely he might fixate on your cat when he sees her.

Once your cat has had some acclimation time - maybe an hour or two—reverse the arrangements, including placing dog-scented towels where your cat is confined. Repeat this process of rotating the animals into different areas and giving them exposure to the smells of the other animals throughout the first day, and during the entire time your pets are housed separately during the acclimation period. You don't need to rotate them every hour or two, but don't leave them in the same areas all the time with no chance to explore and be with family.

Begin feeding your pets on either side of a closed door (one they can't see through) to further associate pleasant experiences with one another. Start out with the food a little ways away from the door so your pets won't be afraid to eat, and gradually move the bowls closer to the door.

Continue keeping your cat and dog separated until their interest in each other's scents begins to wane. Next, arrange an episode where they can see, but not touch one another. This might be through a glass or screen door, or on either side of a baby gate, or with all your pets on leashes. How close your cat is to your dog will depend on how everyone handles the experience.

Keep the introduction brief and enjoyable. Encourage all your pets to lie or sit quietly, using food treats, toys and/or petting. If anyone seems uncomfortable or overly excited, either increase the distance between them, or calmly end the session and keep it shorter next time. Continue to gradually increase the time your cat and dog can see one another, and decrease the distance between them, but not necessarily during the same session.

Once your pets are relaxed you can allow a bit more interaction. Attach your dog's leash to a couch or chair for example, and allow the cat to approach him at her own pace. Keep a squirt bottle with water, or a can full of pennies or harmless citronella oil spray at hand to interrupt over exuberant or aggressive behavior.

You must prevent your dog from developing the habit of chasing, harassing or threatening your cat. Your cat must learn to trust that your dog isn't going to harm her. Micro-managing these introductions and moving at a snail's pace are key. The biggest mistake owners make is moving too quickly through the introduction and allowing any of the pets to become fearful or aggressive. These set-backs can take weeks to recover from.

If you are introducing your new cat to a multiple dog home, you may find the face to face introductions easier for you and your cat to manage with one dog at a time. Once each of the dogs is good with your cat, then stage an introduction session with two (or more) of the dogs at the same time.

Cats and dogs vary as to how quickly they move through the introduction phase. Some cats and dogs may accept one another within just a few days, while others may take weeks or months to tolerate one another.

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The types of relationship outcomes will also vary. Some cats and dogs will become quite good friends, while others will merely tolerate one another. If any of your pets remains fearful of (usually the cat) or aggressive toward (usually the dog) the other, you will need to contact a certified applied or veterinary behaviorist or other behavior consultant to help you.

You do not want any of your pets to be under constant stress from harassment. This is not a good quality of life.

What NOT To Do

Do not leave your new cat and your dog unsupervised together until they have been friendly with one another for quite some time. You must be absolutely convinced that your dog would not want to harm your cat before you leave them alone together. This is especially important if you have more than one dog. Multiple dogs may chase and attack a cat where single dogs wouldn't. Throughout the entire introduction process, you must be more careful of the safety of your cat if you have multiple dogs.

Never encourage a dog to "get the cat" or allow your children to do so. Be careful about using "discipline" or punishment if your pets aren't getting along. Any punishment that comes from you will only be effective when you are there. This won't help your pets get along when you aren't there. Your goal is to teach your dog how to behave appropriately around your cat. To accomplish this, you must use techniques other than, or at least in addition, to "discipline" for the wrong behavior.

For further information, read the Pamphlets for Pet Parents on Punishment and Counter Conditioning and Desensitization.

If You Have Problems

If your pets continue to get into conflicts after the initial introduction, go back to housing them separately. Don't assume that the relationship will somehow improve over time without some sort of intervention. The more your pets show unwanted behaviors toward one another, the more likely these patterns will become habits that are difficult to change. If you are having difficulty encouraging your pets to get along, contact a certified applied or veterinary behaviorist or other behavior consultant to help you. Read the Pamphlet for Pet Parents on this topic to learn how to find a behavior consultant.

Written by Drs. Suzanne Hetts and Daniel Q. Estep, Animal Behavior Associates, Inc. and Ms. Lori Holmberg, M.A. Drs. Hetts and Estep are Certified Applied Animal Behaviorists and international award-winning speakers and authors living in Denver, Colorado. For over 25 years they have been helping pet parents understand their pet's behavior and solve behavior problems.

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