

First Impressions

Behaviourist Sarah Whitehead explains how important it is to get introductions right IT'S SAID THAT you make your greatest impression on someone else in the first few seconds of contact. This means that another person takes the decision on how well they'd like to get to know you, even whether you are going to be friends, based on your immediate rapport. Cats are not so different! They too need the equivalent of social greening, time and space, to become comfortable with the idea of the other individual, whether that be another cat, dog or even us. However, this is often overlooked by keen owners, and is one of the main causes of my phone ringing late at night.

Typically, owners have decided that it would be a nice idea to get their pet a pet. In other words, they have



bought a new kitten to keep their adult cat company, or have been 'adopted' by an older cat that looked so thin and miserable they simply couldn't leave it in the rescue centre, but had to bring it home. But what do they do when they return to the house with new pet in tow? Do they observe the rules of cat decorum and control the introduction the best they can? Do they let the cats sum each other up without forcing the existing cat to defend its territory on sight? Mostly, people tell me they put the kitten on the floor and 'let them get on with it. Get on with it they do! At least, hissing, growling and spitting occur almost immediately, with the established cat making a break for the first available ledge out of range as quickly as possible. At worst, the newcomer flees, with 'Whiskey' in hot pursuit, until they reach the back of the television,

where without further ado there is the most horrendous cat fight, determining that the kitten or newcomer never wants to show its face again.

So, what is the best way to shake hands in cat language? Carefully, is the answer! There aren't many cats who instantly welcome a feline 'intruder' into their territory on sight and invite them to take the best chair, so we need to set up the situation to make both cats feel as secure and protected as possible.

In the initial stages, visual contact isn't even required. This means that both cats can be kept in separate areas of the house. This means that scent signals tell each cat that another is around, but that it is not a direct threat. Both cats can be moved from room to room, and petted, fed and played with in these areas. Once this is done, true scent exchange can begin. Petting one cat to capture its scent on your hands, and then going to the other cat in another room and petting this one too will effectively mingle their individual scents to begin the process of producing a clan odour, where all members of the same household smell alike.

Using a pen in the next stages of introduction is then sensible as it means that visual contact is possible, without the risk of direct conflict. This is useful for preventing fights under the TV, for stopping the new cat disappearing under the wardrobe and staying there for a fortnight, or for flying out through the cat flap never to be seen again. It also prevents the existing cat becoming even more aroused by the sight of a fleeing tail — a sure trigger for the chase instinct which will end in tears. Keeping the new cat in a pen to begin with also means that both cats have a chance to see and smell each other, but with a tangible barrier between them. They are not forced into unnatural social contact by over-exposure to each other. One, usually the existing cat, can wander away and watch from a safe distance, summing up the other's scent, size and body postures, without having to resort to an out and out bust-up.

The pen can be put somewhere above ground level, such as on a table, so that both cats can see each other, but are not forced to look eye to eye on the floor. Introductions like this should be short and sweet. Of course, if you can beg, steal or borrow a bigger dog transit cage, or similar, then you can leave the new cat in it for much longer, but bear in mind that a few minutes' controlled exposure, as many times a day as you can manage, is far better than long periods of tense exposure when tempers are more likely to get frayed. After this time, or when you cannot supervise them fully, the cats should be put in separate rooms.

Watch both cats' body language closely while an introduction is going on. Watch for the cats appearing to become more relaxed in each other's presence. At this stage you can start to feed the cats at opposite ends of the room, with one still in the pen. When they are happy to eat in the same room, you can then move their food bowls closer together, so they end up eating next to each other. After this, only time and patience will tell if your ground work has paid off. Sometimes it's necessary to put the other cat in the pen for periods of introduction too, before being able to let them out, and it's always necessary to supervise initial brief meetings when both cats are free with the utmost concentration. There is little doubt that those first few meetings can be nerve wracking for you, but if the basics are already in place the cats will have been fooled into thinking that they have already lived together for some time. Despite best intentions, careful introductions and long periods of summing each other up, some cats never learn to curl up and lick one another on cosy winter evenings. Personality differences play a great part in all social interactions and resulting friendships, and cats are certainly no exception to this rule.

This information sheet is produced by the Feline Advisory Bureau

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