
Introducing your cat to other cats and dogs

Bringing a new cat or kitten into your home and introducing it to your resident cat or dog can be quite nerve racking. You want them all to get on together and welcome the new feline into the house, but this seldom happens quite so easily — even though your reason for getting another cat may be to keep your resident cat company, it may not rush out and welcome the newcomer with open paws! Careful introductions can help to smooth the way towards harmonious merging of animals — controlling the situation rather than leaving the animals to sort it out for themselves will give a much better chance of a smooth meeting and the best possible start together.

Introducing cats to cats

Remember that cats do not need to be social creatures — unlike the pack-orientated dog they function happily on their own without a social structure around them. They are unlikely to feel the 'need' for a companion even though you would wish to have another cat around. You cannot force cats to like each other — some will live with a newcomer easily, others will never get on or they may just manage to live alongside each other in an uneasy truce — you can only try. However, if there is no competition for food or safe sleeping places (as in most good homes) then cats will accept each other eventually and some will even seem to form close bonds with one another. While it may be a matter of feline choice as to whether cats get on, how you introduce a new cat or kitten into your home and to a resident cat or cats can make the difference between success or failure. Once a relationship becomes violent or very fearful and the cat feels threatened it can be very difficult to change the behaviour patterns. Thus careful introductions which prevent excessive reactions and take things slowly are vital.

Here are some factors involved in bringing cats together successfully:

Adults or kittens?

A kitten is less of a threat to a resident cat than an adult cat because it is still sexually immature. It can also be better to get a kitten of the opposite sex to the resident cat to minimise competition. Neutering helps to remove most of such problems, but may not eliminate them altogether. If you are getting an adult cat again it can be better to bring in one of the opposite sex.

Timing

Choose a quiet time when the household is calm — avoid festivities, parties, visiting relatives or friends and find time to concentrate on calm reassurance for both cats.

Smell is important

Remember that scent is the most important of the cat's senses in terms of communication and well-being. You can try and integrate the new cat into your home and make it less alien by getting it to smell of 'home' before you introduce it to the resident cat. To do this stroke each cat without washing your hands and mix scents in this way. You can also gather scents from around the cat's head area by gently stroking it with a soft cloth and dabbing it around your home and furniture to mix and spread scents. Likewise letting the cat get used to the new smells of the house and another cat before the initial meeting can make it more tolerable. For this reason it can be very useful to delay letting cats meet for a few days or even a week. During this time keep them in separate rooms allowing each to investigate the other's room and bed without actually meeting.

Using a pen or carrier for introductions

It is up to you to make both the new cat and the resident feel as secure as possible and prevent the newcomer from being chased or threatened (or occasionally the other way round). Problems can arise if initial meetings are allowed to deteriorate into a fight or chase. The best way to avoid this is to use a kitting pen for initial introductions. Kitting pens are metal mesh pens about 1m by 0.75m by 1m high with a door which can be left open or shut securely. The cat inside can see what is going on around it but feels safe inside its 'den'. You can put a blanket over the top initially to make the cat feel more secure if you think it feels vulnerable. The pen allows the cats to see each other, sniff through the bars and have a hiss and moan at each other without any attack or intimidation. The bars allow them to be close together but provide protection at the same time. If you have taken on a new kitten then it can be very useful to use the larger pen as a base for the kitten to be kept in initially. Introductions can be made using the pen and you can shut the kitten in with its bed and litter tray if you are going out and don't want to leave it where it can get up to mischief or get into danger. The kitten can be shut in the pen at night (ensure water is available) with the other animals in the same room and they can get used to each other in safety.

If you can't get hold of a pen or crate then you can use a cat carrier or basket for initial introductions. Of course you won't be able to use it as a den to shut the cat or kitten in for long periods because it is too small, but it can be better than nothing.

How to use a carrier or pen or introductions

Place the new cat or kitten in the pen/carrier and let the resident cat come into the room. If you are using a cat carrier place it above ground level so the cats are not forced into direct eye contact with each other which can cause aggression. Let the resident cat come into the room and give it attention and calm reassurance. If the cat decides to run away without investigating the new cat do not force meetings but accept that things may take a little time — this is probably the type of cat which will not initiate aggressive meetings but will stay out of the way and gradually accept the new cat in the household over time. If the cats do show signs of aggression, distract them with a noise and then praise them for quiet encounters. You can use tit bits to encourage the cats to stay near each other and accept the other's presence and make it a positive experience — you want the cats to associate each other with pleasant happenings, not shouting or chasing. If you are using a large pen then you can allow the resident cat free access at times when the kitten/cat is in the pen over a number of days so that they gradually get used to each other. If you are using a carrier then you will need to be a little more proactive and orchestrate frequent meetings. With both methods you can start to feed the cats at the same time, the resident outside and the new cat inside the pen or carrier on the floor. Throughout this process there may be some hissing and spitting but this should gradually change into curiosity and gradual acceptance — this may take several days or weeks, depending on the individual cats.

Face-to-face meeting

When you feel the time is right to let them meet without the pen then you can again use food as a distraction. Withhold food so that they are somewhat hungry and then feed them in the same room. Choose a room where either cat can escape behind furniture or jump up high or hide if it wants to. Put down the resident cat's food and then let the new cat out of its basket to eat — you will have to judge how close they can be — don't attempt side by side initially!

Be calm and reassuring and reward the behaviour you want with praise and tit bits of a favourite food. Gauge how the cats are getting on — they may find their own spots and curl up for a sleep or you may need to keep the new one separate again for a little longer, using meals as a time for them to get together a bit more. Once you are sure they are not going to fight or chase then you can start to utilise the whole house — the cats will probably find places to sleep and routines which allow them to live peacefully in the same house and partake of all the benefits of food, warmth and attention while gradually becoming used to and accepting one another.

How long will it take ?

It may only take a day or two or it may take several weeks for cats to tolerate each other. It may take months before the cats are relaxed with each other, but you are on your way to success if you reach the stage of a

calm truce between them. It is amazing how a cold wet day outside will force even the worst adversaries together in front of the fire after a large bowl of food.

Introducing the dog

While dogs and cats have often been portrayed as enemies, it is usually a great deal easier to introduce a new cat to a dog than to another cat. While both animals may be wary of each other initially, they do not see the other as direct competition and can actually get on very well. If your dog is used to cats he may be excited initially at having a new one in the house but he will soon settle down and the novelty will wear off very quickly. He will begin to see the new cat as part of his pack. Many dogs will live happily with their own cats while chasing strange felines out of the garden, so you will need to take care until the cat is seen as one of the household.

Likewise if your new cat or kitten has previously lived with a dog then it will be much less likely to be frightened for long and will become confident around the dog more quickly. However, initially safety must come first. You will need to keep everything under control until the dog and cat have got used to each other. Stroke the dog and cat separately but without washing your hands to exchange their scents. The cat will then take on the smell profile of the house and become part of the dog's pack. Once again the large pen is ideal for first meetings to keep the situation calm and the cat protected. Let the dog sniff the newcomer through the bars and get over its initial excitement. The cat may well hiss and spit but it is well protected. If you have a large pen then you can put the cat in this at night in the room where the dog sleeps and let them get used to each other for a few days or even a week, depending on how used to cats the dog is. Some dogs, especially those not used to cats or of an excitable or aggressive disposition, need extra special care for introductions. They should be kept as calm as possible on the lead and made to sit quietly. The new cat should be given a safe position in the room and allowed to get used to the dog and approach it if it wants. This may take quite some time and requires patience and rewards for the dog if it behaves well. For quieter dogs and those used to cats, introductions can be made by using a strong cat carrier. Keep the dog on a lead initially, place the carrier on a high surface and allow controlled introductions which are short and frequent. Most dogs will soon calm down when they realise the newcomer is not actually very interesting.

Progress to meetings with the dog on a lead initially for safety. If your dog is rather excitable then take it for a vigorous walk first to get rid of some of its energy! Breeds such as terriers or those breeds which like to chase, such as greyhounds, may need to be kept well under control until they have learned that the cat is not 'fair game'! Young pups are likely to get very excited and may try to 'play' with the new cat which is unlikely to want to join in! You may need to work hard to keep things calm and be aware that a sudden dash from the cat will induce a chase. Praise the dog for calm interactions, make it sit quietly and use food treats to reward the dog for good behaviour. Again, associate the presence of the cat with reward for calm behaviour. When you progress to access without the lead make sure there are places where the cat can escape to — high ledges or furniture it can use to feel safe. Never leave the dog and cat together unattended until you are happy they are safe together. The cat's food will be hugely tempting for any dog, so site it up and out of the way of thieving canine jaws! Likewise a litter tray can be pretty tempting and should be kept out of reach of the dog if it is likely to snaffle the contents.

This information sheet is produced by the Feline Advisory Bureau

The Feline Advisory Bureau is the leading charity dedicated to promoting the health and welfare of cats through improved feline knowledge, to help us all care better for our cats. Currently we are helping almost 4 million cats and their owners a year. I