

THE BEST WAYS TO INTRODUCE CATS & DOGS

By Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

A significant percentage of U.S. households have both a dog and a cat. If your home is one of them, hopefully your pets took to each other right away, or at least called a truce and decided to peacefully coexist. Unfortunately, not every pet parent is so lucky, because not all dogs and cats can get along. Many can, but some, depending on their temperament, socialization, confidence levels, past experiences, predatory drive, age and more, will never be friends.

That's why, when introducing a new cat to a home with a dog, or vice versa, you should never assume you can simply put them together and let them work things out for themselves. This approach will cause stress levels to skyrocket (including yours), even in a best-case scenario.

It's also important to recognize these introductions can be dangerous, especially for the cat. Some dogs have never been around cats and have no idea what to expect or how to behave; others view them as prey and give chase, which as you can imagine, tends to get the relationship off to a very rocky start.

Early Socialization Can Set the Stage for a Harmonious Relationship

The phrase "fighting like cats and dogs" didn't arise by accident. Both canines and felines come equipped with a strong prey drive and a territorial nature. But since the average dog is much bigger and stronger than the average kitty, if he decides Mr. Whiskers is prey, your dog has the potential to seriously hurt or even kill your cat.

Still, some dogs and cats become BFFs, seemingly oblivious to their predetermined roles as natural adversaries. Ideally, if you want your dog and cat to get along, your pup should be socialized with cats during the sensitive period between 3 and 12 weeks of age.



For kittens, the sensitive period for socialization is between 2 and 7 weeks of age, so this is the best time to expose yours to dogs (in a safe manner, of course). Pets who gain this valuable exposure to other species during the sensitive period will often have no trouble adjusting to a new cat or dog in the household later on, provided their early experiences were positive.

Getting the Preliminaries Right

No matter the age of your pets or the extent of their socialization, the initial introduction phase must be handled carefully. It must be done gradually over a period of hours, or more likely, days or even weeks, depending on the personalities involved.

Since a cat is rarely a threat to a dog (unless it's a small puppy), your dog will need to be restrained on a leash during those first crucial meetings. That's why he should already be comfortable on a leash and obedience trained to reliably respond to important verbal commands such as "sit."

If your new pet is a cat, keep in mind that kitties are very sensitive to unfamiliar environments, sounds, tastes, smells, etc., and are very easily stressed by any change in their lives.

That's why I recommend you separate the new addition in a little bed-and-breakfast setup of her own for at least a week (more about this shortly). This will help her get acclimated on her own terms, which is the way cats prefer things. Following are the basic steps for introducing cats and dogs.

Introducing a New Dog to Your Cat

First, be sure your cat has multiple escape routes (out of the room, onto a high-up location or underneath a couch that your dog can't access, for instance). If necessary, use baby gates so your cat has a safe spot to retreat to. Safety must be your first priority at all times.

Bring your dog in on a leash and ensure he's unable to lunge at or reach your cat. Let kitty make the first move, either moving toward your dog or away from him. Notice your dog's reaction. Is he stiff, staring at your cat, barking, whining or pulling to get at your cat? These are signs his prey instinct is strong and you need to rethink and regroup (see below).

If your dog appears calm, lead him away from the cat and then take off the leash, monitoring the interaction that follows. If necessary, distract your dog with a toy, treats or a short training session, giving easy commands such as "sit" and "down" or a short walk outside to get his focus off the cat. Don't allow your dog to corner or intimidate your cat and reward him when he focuses on you rather than kitty.

Introducing a New Cat to Your Dog

Once you've decided where to seclude the new kitty, put everything she'll need in her safe room, such as a litterbox, bedding, toys, scratching post, food and water, and a place to hide. This will be her home until she feels like venturing out into the rest of the house. Bring kitty into your home in a carrier, take her straight to her room and close the door so that your dog can't immediately investigate. Open the carrier and let her explore her new surroundings at her own pace.

Once she's comfortable in her room, secure a baby gate across the doorway so she still feels safe but not isolated. If your dog can jump over the gate, use two gates, one 6 inches off the ground and a second on top of the first, so the dog can't cross the barrier, but the cat can get under it to come and go as she pleases.

Introduce other human members of the household to the new kitty one at a time. Ideally, this takes place in, for example, the living room, and the new cat has ventured out on her own to investigate. Arrange these meet-and-greets in a calm, quiet, low-stress environment so as not to scare or further stress the new kitty.

Bottom line: many cats and dogs get along right from the beginning, while others grow to be friends after a period of adjustment. Some learn to coexist by simply ignoring one another. And sadly, once in a while the best, safest and kindest decision is to find another forever home for the new dog or cat.

Allow your cat to get acquainted with your dog on her own terms; this may take days, weeks or even months. When she sees or hears the dog she may retreat to her safe room for many weeks, and this is ok. Make sure to not force the introduction.

When the Road Gets Bumpy

Even when you've done everything right, there's no guarantee your dog and cat will become instant friends. If they aren't getting along, you can try to gradually reacquaint them in a neutral setting, with the cat having access to her safe room and your dog under your control on a leash. While each pet is calm, reward him or her with a favorite treat and positive attention.

Repeat this frequently, gradually decreasing the physical distance between them while increasing the amount of time they spend in each other's company. The goal is to get them to a point where they can coexist peacefully.

Eventually, as your dog grows more familiar with having a cat around, he may lose interest in her. The next step is allowing supervised interactions with your dog off-leash, and, eventually, unsupervised interactions. Obviously, the latter should only take place after a significant period of supervised interactions have occurred with no incidents of excitement or aggressive behavior.

If your dog shows any signs of aggression toward your cat, such as growling, lunging in her direction or snapping, or your cat shows signs of stress when around your dog (such as growling, hissing or swatting), you'll need to separate them for a period before trying again.