

Introducing Cats and Dogs

When you're bringing a new cat into a household with a dog in it, or bringing a dog home when you already have a cat, the way you start off is very important. Cats need time to adjust to changes, and dogs can pose a danger to cats without even meaning to. If you take the time to introduce your new pet to your household gradually, you can avoid setting up problems between cats and dogs that can take a long time to resolve.

Some dogs are aggressive toward cats, but even those that aren't are likely to chase, especially if the cat moves quickly or runs away. A dog who "just wants to play" can easily injure or even unintentionally kill a cat, so you'll need to supervise all interaction between them as they get to know one another -- and you may always need to, depending on your pets.

If your cat's first encounter with your dog is aggressive or frightening, they may take a dislike to one another that won't go away. Start off slowly, allow your pets to get used to each other gradually and under very controlled circumstances, and make sure that your cat feels as secure as possible throughout the process. How long the introduction process will take will depend on the pets involved. Take your cues from your pets and don't rush the process.

Start with Separation and Training

Provide your cat with a room of their own while they're adjusting. Make it a comfortable place with everything they need: food, water, a litter box located away from the food and water, a bed, toys, something to scratch on, and attention from people and playtime on a regular basis. The idea is not to isolate them, but to give a place to get comfortable and feel confident.

Barricade the room with a baby gate that's low enough for the cat to jump over while still blocking the dog. If your cat can't jump, set the gate so there's enough room that the cat can go under it. Or, you could install a cat flap in the room's door. Outside that room, make sure your cat has one or more safe places to retreat to where they feel comfortable and the dog can't reach. You can provide high perches using a cat tree (make sure it won't tip if the dog jumps against it), wide shelves, or window ledges. Your dog will need to be trained well enough to respond to some simple cues from you before they can meet the cat: at a minimum, coming to you when called and sitting and staying. Work with your dog on these cues without the cat around, using positive reinforcement and making your training sessions fun.

Introductions

Before the dog and cat have their first face-to-face meeting, put some of the dog's bedding in the cat's room and vice versa so that they can get used to the scent. Let the cat explore the house and sniff out the dog's scents while the dog isn't there, then let the dog sniff in the cat's absence. Do all of this before the cat and dog meet, and the initial encounter won't be such a shock.

You can also try feeding your cat and dog near the opposite sides of the same door. Start at a distance that they don't get upset, and gradually move the dishes closer to the door. You can also give the cat or dog treats near the door. You're getting them started associating good things with the scent and presence of the other pet.

Once the animals are relaxed in each area, you can begin the actual meet-ups. Start with them in separate rooms, propping the door between them open just a little bit and having good things happen in each other's presence -- mealtimes, treats, play, and petting. As your cat and dog can be near one another without anxiety, you can start letting them spend time together in the same room. Keep your dog entirely under control during these meetings, on a leash at first. Your dog will stay more relaxed if you give them at least four feet of leash, and be sure to avoid popping or yanking the leash.

Start with just a few minutes, always making sure that encounters don't escalate to anything dangerous. If there's any fear or aggression, or if your dog gets overexcited and out of control, back up a few steps in the process until they're comfortable again. When your cat and dog are together, speak to them in calm, quiet tones, and praise them when they're behaving appropriately with each other. Don't use angry or harsh tones when they're together -- they may associate your anger with the other pet, and that can set them back. Help your dog to practice their good manners around the cat, by asking them to remain calm by sitting or lying down and staying, and reward them for doing it with small bits of delicious food.

These early stages work best with at least two people: one to manage the dog, and one to give the cat positive attention and treats while the dog is around. Let your cat set the pace; never force them to get closer to the dog than they want to, and allow them to leave the room if they wish. Continue to supervise your cat and dog whenever they're together, and always provide your cat with a place to escape when they want to. If your dog does start to chase the cat, immediately interrupt them; don't allow the chase to turn into a game for your dog, and a terrifying experience for your cat.

If you take your time introducing your new pet to your household, you'll benefit in the long run with pets that live peacefully together. Don't rush, and allow your pets to set the pace.