

Introducing Cats

When you're bringing a new cat into your household, the way you start off is all-important. Cats need time to adjust to changes, including new animals in their territory. If you take the time to introduce your new cat to your household gradually, you can avoid setting up problems between cats that can take a long time to resolve. If your cats' first encounter is hostile or aggressive, they may take a dislike to one another that won't go away. Start off slowly, allow your cats to get used to each other's scent before they meet, and avoid any unpleasant confrontations between cats.

How long the introduction process will take will depend on the cats involved: a young kitten going from the company of their littermates to a new home may crave company and get used to new cats (or other pets) quickly, while a cat who's spent most of their adult life as an only cat or with just one other feline companion may take longer. Take your cues from your cats and let them determine the pace of the introduction process. Don't rush it.

Start with Separation

When your new cat first comes home, give them a room of their own--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. Once your cat is feeling comfortable and confident in their new space you can proceed to acclimating them to the other resident cat.

Feed your new cat and your resident cats near the opposite sides of the door. Start at a distance that the cats don't get upset, and gradually move the dishes closer to the door. You can also give the cats treats near the door. You're getting them started associating good things with the scent and presence of the other cat.

Scent Swapping

Swap the cats' bedding, or use a soft towel or fleece blanket and pet your cat on his cheeks to collect the cat's scent and pheromones, so that they can get used to the scent of the other cat before they meet each other face to face. After your new cat has gotten comfortable in their room, you can also have the cats trade places: let your new cat explore the resident cat's area while the resident cat spends time in the new cat's room. Do all this before the cats meet, and the initial encounter won't be such a shock.

Short and Sweet Interactions

Once the cats are relaxed in each other's areas, you can begin their actual meet-ups. Start with propping the door between them open just a little bit with a baby gate or other fence up so there is visual access but both cats are secure in their spaces. Feed or give treats to both cats or keep your resident cat occupied with a low key game or petting while they have a chance to notice each other. Keep this session short so the cats don't have too much time to get overwhelmed or scared. Allow your new cat to explore the house at dawn and dusk but put your resident cat in another room or in a crate away from areas where the new cat may visit so there are no accidental run-ins during this stage.

As the cats can be near one another without anxiety, you can start letting the new cat out to spend time with the resident cat. Start with just a few minutes, always making sure that encounters don't escalate to aggression -- if the cats are fearful or aggressive, back up a few steps in the process until they're comfortable again. When the cats 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 the cats are together -- they may associate your anger with the other cat, and that can set them back.

To keep your resident cat from feeling displaced, try as much as possible not to disturb their routine. Give your resident cat plenty of positive attention when the new cat is around, and wait to lavish attention on the new cat in the presence of the other cat until they're all friends. If you take your time introducing your new cat to your household, you'll benefit in the long run with cats who live peacefully together. Don't rush, and allow your cats to set the pace.

What if There is a Fight?

This is a good sign that you have gone too far, too fast. Back up to the very beginning and start over but this time take it even slower. If your cats still aren't even okay with seeing the other cat after these steps, contact a skilled behavior specialist. In some cases, medication could help ease tensions during the introduction process, talk to your veterinarian about what options are best for your cat.