

Introducing Your Resident Cat to your New Dog

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Start off by carefully choosing the right dog. Some dogs will integrate into a family with a resident cat better than others. Consider adopting your dog from a shelter that does temperament testing so that the staff can give you an idea of how the dog may respond to your cat. This will help you to find a dog who will be more likely to get along with your cat with a proper introduction.

Before you bring your new dog home you should spend some time preparing your house with a focus on your resident cat. Ensure that there is plenty of vertical space where your cat can easily and safely retreat away from the dog if she wants to. In addition, if your cat normally has her food, water, litter box, scratching post and favorite toys in an area where the dog will now be, it is good to plan ahead and move these away to an area only the cat has access to and get the cat used to the change before the dog arrives. This helps reduce stress and avoid problems with your cat being too afraid to eat/drink or use the litter box once the dog arrives.

Choose the room that will be the sanctuary room for your dog. This room should have a solid door. On the day you bring your dog home, temporarily secure your cat in a different room she likes and bring the dog directly to his sanctuary room, with comfy bedding, water and a treat. Close the door behind you. Once the dog is secured in the room, you can let the cat out. Start to work on basic training with your dog so that you have some control over him when it comes to introducing the dog to your cat. It is important for your dog to respond to commands such as sit and stay.

Ideally your dog should be crate trained. It will make the introductions easier and safer. The crate (or your dog's sanctuary room if not a crate) should be within the secure sanctuary room with a solid door that is situated away from your cat's normal feeding/drinking/litter box/sleeping areas.

Even though you can't 100% remove the scent of the new dog, wash your hands before returning to resident cat, and the same the other way around. Keep a bathrobe, large button-down shirt, smock or some other

covering to put over your clothes when you are with the dog in the sanctuary room. This prevents the resident cat from being too overwhelmed by all of the dog's smells. It is a really important part of the calming down process and helps to remove you from the territorial disputes. Anything we can do to lessen the stress we want to do.

Be cool, calm and collected. Keep it light and casual, like nothing is different. If you are stressed or nervous by the introduction, the cat will be sure to pick up on it - and will blame the dog! Your resident cat will know the newcomer dog is in the room so she may growl, hiss or display fearful or aggressive body postures. If your cat does this, allow that cat to calm down, distract or redirect the cat with a toy so she works out any tension in a positive manner, and lead the cat away from the sanctuary room and offer a small meal or treat. Stay at this stage until your resident cat is no longer agitated, fearful or overly focused on the sanctuary room door and the fact that the newcomer dog is in there. This may be two days, or a few days, go at the cat's pace. Don't rush this. When the cat is calm, we can move forward with the process.

Now, we are going on to the scent communication phase. This allows the cat and dog to learn about each other and gather information in a controlled, safe and secure way. It allows the cats to feel some sense of control over the situation. Sometimes, with cats, it is best to let them think this was all their idea. This allows them to take everything in on their own terms. Take a clean sock, gently rub the newcomer dog around the mouth and head. Take another, separate sock and rub your resident cat in the same way. Place the sock with the dog's scent in an area where your resident cat hangs out a lot of the time, but not right in a cat bed or favorite sleeping spot. Just have it in the room where she spends most of her time. Place the sock with your resident cat's scents in the dog's sanctuary room in a similarly neutral area. Continue with this stage until the cat seems comfortable, meaning no aggression or posturing and eating/using the litter box normally. Again, this can be two days or a few days - observe your cat carefully for signs she is comfortable, signs of fear, or signs of aggression. Go at the cat's pace. Don't go on until the cat is acting normally. You can refresh the scents on the socks a couple of times a day. Don't go on to the next step unless this is OK.

Next is the Separate Exploration Stage.

Don't move on to this next step unless your cat is handling everything so far 100% fine. If all is going well, now it's time to proceed to the next step. Now, place your resident cat in a separate room (use any room except for the dog's sanctuary room, even a bathroom is OK) so that the newcomer dog can safely explore your house. The dog should be on a leash. Open the door to the sanctuary room and let the dog start to explore and investigate his home without the distraction or fear of your resident cat, but you are holding the leash so the dog does not go after the room where the cat is temporarily secured. During this time the newcomer dog gets information, but he also deposits his scents on his own timeframe for your resident cat to take in on his own time. At first, let the dog have one or two 10-minute sessions per day of exploring the house on a leash without your resident cat present. As soon as the newcomer dog is done with his session and is safely back in his sanctuary room, you can let your resident cat back out. They should not see each other. Gradually increase the duration and amount of these sessions. Go to one or two 12-minute sessions per day, then one or two 15-minute sessions per day, and cap it for the rest of this program at two twenty-minute sessions per day. The dog can get his separate roaming sessions every day. You'll have to judge how often you do this step based on their comfort level and acceptance. Make sure when the dog is out, he isn't only looking over his shoulder for your resident cat, and when your resident cat is back out from her temporary room, she is not focused on looking for the newcomer dog. Wait for these behaviors to calm down. It could be days. Don't worry if it seems to be going slowly, that is OK. Just like people, each cat enters into a new relationship at a different pace and comfort level. Don't rush this, and don't be worried if it seems to be going slowly. Do not go on to the next step until this is going well.

The next step is Food Association Sessions.

After the scent stages have been going really well with the sock swapping and the cat/dog being out separately to roam and deposit and gather scents, now we are ready for the Food Association stage. Food is motivating for a cat and dog, especially a yummy treat that you know they really like. You can use food to help the cat and dog form positive associations with each other. Each pet will think: hey! I notice that

whenever that other animal is nearby, there are delicious treats and I get attention! Maybe this other animal is OK! The dog should be on a leash or in the crate. Open the door to the dog's sanctuary room a crack (just a crack!) and let them see each other as you give them each a small meal or special treat. They need to be far enough apart so that they stay in their comfort zones. They do not need to be right on either side of the door at the beginning if they do not want to. They can start off several feet away from each other. Start wherever their comfort zones are. Let them eat and close the door. Do this for meals and for special treats, as you are able. As the cat and dog get more comfortable with each other, you can open the door a teeny bit wider and also move the bowls closer. Having them eat in front of each other teaches them that positive things happen when the other pet is around. Again, use your judgment in how quickly to proceed with this. My feeling is it is always best to be conservative. It is really important for these sessions to end on a positive note. So, I would rather you do a 5 second session with the door open a millimeter that ends well than to try to do a 2-minute session that ends with fur flying. If 5 seconds is all they can handle, then feed them the yummy treat for 5 seconds, then close the door, and wait until the next session to try again.

Once your cat and dog seem relaxed and will eat on either side of the cracked door, if you are using a crate, you can move to having your dog on a leash. Keep your dog next to you on a secure leash while the cat is on the other side of the cracked door and give them both praise and treats to reward calm behavior. It is helpful to enlist a family member or friend for these sessions. If your dog becomes highly excitable at any time during the session, calmly close the door. Do this several times a day, keeping the meetings short so that stress is kept to a minimum and every session ends on a positive note.

Very gradually and incrementally, lengthen the duration of the sessions. Very gradually and incrementally, move the bowls closer. Very gradually and incrementally, open the door a bit wider. You get the idea. Let the cat set the pace of the progress. You can reserve a super-duper special treat for these sessions. Stay on this phase until the bowls are pretty close, the door is open 6-8 inches and they can eat most, if not all of their food without being fixated on the other animal

For the Food Association stage, you want to start with a distance between the 2 pets that is not troubling to the cat. I know it may not seem fair to the

dog, but you need to go at the cat's pace. You will know you have the proper distance to start this stage from if the cat is not exhibiting any signs of arousal, aggression or anxiety towards the new dog. In other words, the cat feels safe at this distance. It's OK if the distance is large at the beginning. If at any time one of the pets becomes anxious, increase the distance between them until the cat/dog is no longer fearful. During the next session, start again at the distance with which the pet was comfortable in the previous session.

After several sessions at a particular distance, they will become more accustomed to each other's presence. Then, at this point, the next step is to decrease the distance by just an inch or 2. Monitor them closely for early signs of anxiety. If there are no attempts to attack, no body language signaling impending doom or no signs of anxiety, gradually and incrementally decrease the distance between them at the next session, and gradually and incrementally open the door wider, and gradually and incrementally lengthen the duration of the sessions. At any time, if either pet becomes anxious, back up and start again at an approved distance. Do not move on to the next step until this step is going well.

The next step is face to face interactions in the same room.

When you are ready to introduce your new dog and resident cat in the same room, do so when your dog is at his calmest. Take your dog for a long walk beforehand. For the first introduction, use a room in which your cat is easily able to escape to a safe place if she wants to, so a room with lots of preferred vertical space is perfect. A room with some familiar and well used cat trees, window perches, a multi-tiered cat scratching post so the cat can escape from the interaction is ideal.

It is best to have the dog start off in the crate for these sessions. While the dog is in the crate you can give him a distracting toy and then bring your cat into the room. Never force any interactions, just give your cat a lot of attention and positive experiences such as attention, brushing, playing, catnip and treats while she is in the same room as your dog. Whatever your cat finds pleasurable and enticing, use that to form positive associations with the dog. Let the cat get used to the dog being there and in a non-threatening way.

These sessions should be short at the beginning. Ten minutes once or twice a day is fine, depending on your schedule. When ten-minute sessions are going OK, then you can do twenty-minute sessions. When the twenty-minute sessions are going OK, go to thirty-minute sessions. When the cat can handle thirty minutes with the dog in the same room with the dog in the crate, we can move to the next step. If at any time there are signs of aggression, calmly end the session and wait for the next time to try again.

Once your cat and dog seem relaxed in the room together, you can move onto having your dog on a leash out of the crate. Keep your dog next to you on a secure leash while the cat is in the room and give them both praise and treats to reward calm, non-aggressive behavior. It is helpful to enlist a family member or friend to be with you during this time so each pet can be praised and rewarded at the same time. If your dog becomes highly excitable at any time during this stage of the introduction or the cat becomes aggressive, hisses or growls, remove them from the room. Do this several times a day, keeping the meetings short at first so that stress is kept to a minimum. Like the step before, start off with short sessions and gradually add a little more time to the sessions and slowly build up.

Let the cat set the pace of the interactions. You should allow the cat to choose whether she approaches the dog or not. Eventually the cat will come closer to the dog. Fishing pole/wand toys are great devices to coax the cat to come a little closer and to distract the cat if fears or anxieties arise.

Make sure you have an inanimate safe object (like a large cushion) to place between the dog and the cat just in case. Another option is a small towel, quilt, or blanket. You can toss it onto the cat or dog, whichever is acting aggressively. It won't hurt, but it will be enough to startle them and disrupt the aggression. A large piece of cardboard can also be used as a barrier, if needed.

Be patient, it will probably take a few weeks of having your dog on the leash with the cat around before everyone is sufficiently comfortable to try with the dog off-leash. These interactions should still be closely supervised. In the initial stages there may be some hissing and tail swishing – but this should settle down after a few days. Keep a close eye on both animals and never punish either of them for aggressive behavior as this will be a

negative experience associated with the presence of the other animal and counterproductive.

When you are ready to let your dog off the leash, ensure that your cat has an easy escape route – again, choose a room with vertical space like a multi-tiered cat tree, window perches, high window sills or shelves. Never leave your pets unsupervised and take things very slowly, allowing your pets to become used to one another gradually at their own pace.

Begin letting the cat and dog be together for very short periods of time. We will gradually and conservatively increase this time. What we are doing is systematic desensitization. This is an active process where a cat or dog learns that a situation is neither important or meaningful. When the situation doesn't harm either the cat or the dog or have any consequences, they will stop reacting over time. With this type of learning, they don't forget about a situation; instead, they actively learn not to react to it over time. In other words, they get used to it. Systematic desensitization is a very controlled approach to presenting the cat and the dog with the thing they are afraid or nervous about (each other) and by doing it gradually and carefully, we can decrease fear, anxiety and stress. We aren't going to go from zero to sixty. At first, let the cat and dog be together for one 10-minute session per day. When this is going well, go to one 15-minute session per day. When this is going well, go to one 20-minute session per day - and so forth. You can do more than one session per day, but don't add more time to the duration of each session until the prior time is going well. These sessions should be supervised until you are sure the cat and dog are OK. Eventually you will build up to them being out and about during the day and at night. Finally, they can be integrated full-time.

Be Ready to Disrupt, Distract and Redirect

Keep a fishing pole type toy handy for distraction and redirection as the cat and dog start spending more time together. Be preemptive and err on the side of caution – disrupt, distract, and redirect if you even think or sense there may be a negative interaction. At this point, don't worry if there is some occasional hissing. Hissing is fear and not overt aggression. Just keep the interactions calm and stay the course. Eventually, as they continue to see that the appearance of the other pet means food, treats, playtime and attention, these positive associations will become ingrained. The good thing about distraction and redirection training is that it is a

positive way to do cat behavior modification. Cat like a reason to do a certain behavior. When you disrupt, distract and redirect with play, you will break negative behavior patterns and give your cat a reason to stop going after the dog because he's getting better options: playtime, positive attention from you and rewarding treats instead. Be aware of the triggers or get a sense of what body signals let you know a fight or chase may be coming, but if you can't figure it out ahead of time that is OK, once a cat goes towards the other cat, if you always have toys accessible, you can distract and re-direct any time.

Ensure your cat receives a lot of individual attention from you during the period of time over which you are introducing the dog. Do not leave your animals alone together until you are absolutely certain that they tolerate each other, the dog has been trained not to chase the cat and they are all safe. If you are not sure, continue to supervise directly when you are at home or physically separate them when you are not at home. The cat should ALWAYS have somewhere safe to which they can retreat (an area the dog cannot get to, such as elevated platforms), even when you do feel comfortable about leaving the two unsupervised together.