



Introducing a New Dog into a Home with Cats

We receive many calls for help when a family with a resident cat (or cats) decide to bring a new dog into the house. Often, the cat has had a history of living with dogs so if the dog is safe with cats, all goes well. Unfortunately, when things don't go smoothly, it can be difficult to reverse and get things back on track. By this point, the cat and dog have already had negative experiences and may hold a grudge based on that experience!

If you are considering bringing a dog into your home with a cat, you should first be sure that the dog you are adopting into your family is safe with cats. Dogs vary in their behavior with cats with some being unsafe and aggressive, some are too playful making it unsafe for cats, and others are fearful and therefore it is a big unknown. Avoidance and fear is not a good sign. Of course, there are some dogs who are completely polite and friendly, making integration both fun and simple!

If you are getting the dog from an animal shelter, ask the staff and volunteers if the dog has been cat tested. If the dog has not been cat tested, you should ask that they do so before deciding to adopt that dog. It can be terribly heartbreaking when it just isn't safe to try to integrate a dog with a cat. Not all situations can be resolved when integrations don't go well.

If you are getting a puppy, the steps will be similar, but the behavior will look different. Puppies are blank slates in terms of learning, but their personalities will be apparent. Most puppies are very curious of cats with some being a little too bold and playful and others being very respectful. Regardless, do not let the puppy chase the cat no matter how much he wants to. Puppies must be guided in their interaction with a cat in order to be properly socialized.

Before you bring the dog home you should make up a room in your house where the cat can be comfortably confined away from the dog until everyone is fully integrated. This should be a bedroom or an office with food and water as well as a litter box, a cat tree, and some toys. It is sometimes difficult to ask the cat to go from full run of the house to a single room so you want this room to be as comfortable as possible. Be sure the cat is enclosed in this room before the dog comes into the house.

When the dog first comes home, save the cat introductions for a little later. Let the dog acclimate to the house first. The dog has a lot to acclimate to and much to learn such as where to go to the bathroom, what to play with, where he is allowed to be and not such as furniture and rooms, what the meal routine is, who are all the members of the new family (both people and animals), what is the household routine, where will he stay when left alone, etc. With all of that to learn, it is best to wait on the introduction. Also, most dogs are very excited or stimulated as a result of all these changes so social introductions with other animals are best saved for when things are a little calmer.

Once your dog has acclimated to his new digs and is a little calmer, you may proceed to the cat introduction. Be sure the dog is on a leash before he sees the cat for the first time. If you have multiple cats, you should introduce them one at a time to the dog and allow for a break between each new cat introduction. You will also want some help for this step so one person can be on the leash with the dog and another person can be focused on the cats.

With the dog on a leash, allow the cat out of the room. You should be in a main living or family room with the dog, not right in front of the door where the cat is. Allow the dog to see the cat and the cat to see the dog. You don't want to rush through this part. When things happen too quickly, the dog and cat are more likely to become defensive. Don't allow

the dog to approach the cat, rather let the cat begin to approach the dog. By slowing this part down, you will get to see interaction happening slowly and be able to get a better read on what is happening. Since the cat was there first and the dog is new, it is important to let the cat set the tone, providing the cat is not advancing upon the dog aggressively!

Don't allow more than five seconds of unbroken curiosity from the dog to the cat such as staring, tracking the cat's movements, stiff tail wag, etc. If things feel too stiff or too still, just back away with the dog and redirect his attention in a jolly voice. Allow the dog to "shake off" the tension and try it again. Do not allow the dog to pounce, lunge on the leash, bark, whine, cry, etc. Walk away with dog to increase distance to the cat and reward the dog for any break in that aroused behavior.

Reward the dog for doing anything other than focusing on or attempting to interact with the cat. You can softly praise the dog for gentle curiosity. If the initial introduction feels calm and safe you can allow the dog to calmly, and slowly approach the cat. Be sure the cat has an escape route and is not cornered. Interaction can only happen if both animals are interested in the interaction and at the same time. If either pet is not interested in close contact, just end the introduction by putting the cat back into the room and closing the door to try this another time.

If things are calm, you feel that everyone is safe, and the dog and cat are interested in meeting, you can let the dog and cat come into contact. At this point, you should only allow up to 2 seconds of interaction at one time. Call and gently back away with the dog to give the dog and cat a break and keep things from becoming too intense. You may allow them back together again but ensure that the dog isn't too invasive with sniffing or nuzzling the cat with his nose. The dog shouldn't use his paws to interact either. This should be a polite "getting to know you" session with some forced breaks in interaction just to keep things fluid.

If you see polite interaction from the dog such as gentle sniffing, eye blinking, loose and floppy body movements, loose sweeping tail, breaks in interaction to do something else such as looking back at you, sniffing the floor, scratching an itch, etc. then things are going well on the dog's side. If you see polite interaction from the cat such as body and/or face rubbing things or the dog, tail straight up in the air maybe with a little hook at the top, circling around – toward and away from the dog, walking on tippy toes, sniffing the air in the direction of the dog, etc., then things are going very well on the cat's side!

It is not uncommon for cats to freeze, stare or even hiss or swat if the dog gets too close for the cat's preference. If your cat has been socialized and lived with dogs in the past, you may have an idea of whether to be concerned. Cats often engage in defensive behaviors when a dog becomes overwhelming to the cat and in most situations, this is a completely normal part of a social negotiation. Remember, the cat sets the tone. There are a few cats that are injurious when they become defensive by unsheathing their claws when scratching or even biting. If your cat hasn't been around a dog or if you are aware of your cat's propensity to bite or scratch when he swats, you may want a cat behavior expert to help guide you through the integration.

You can allow the dog to be around the cat for as long as the interaction is fluid and both parties want to continue in a friendly manner. This means the dog may be interested in the cat but the dog is calm and gentle and his attention is easily moved on to other things. In the beginning, this is often only for a few minutes and then the cat is enclosed in the room again and the dog is redirected to other things. Give time for everyone to relax and move onto other things before bringing them together again.

After several sessions of these leashed, guided introductions, you will need to decide when it is OK to take the leash off the dog. The best

guideline is when you are no longer needing to use the leash to restrict or hold the dog back in any way when interacting with the cat. At this time, it will be OK to either let go of the leash and let it drag around or take it off entirely.

After some time off leash with everyone doing normal things, it is still best to enclose the cats again and repeat this process several times until you, the cat, and the dog are calm together and they no longer need your guidance to properly interact. During these sessions, it is imperative that the dog not chase the cat. If this seems like it is going to happen or if it happens, pick up the dog's leash or leash him back up and return to the previous step of only allowing leashed interactions.

Once the dog and cat are spending more and more "normal" time together and their interaction does not need to be supervised, guided, or controlled, you can leave them to interact when you are home. It is still best to separate the cat either in her room, or the dog in his crate when you are not home. The cat and dog should not be alone together until you are completely comfortable with their behavior and until both the dog and cat are comfortable with each other.

Bringing a new dog into the home you share with a cat should be a fun, safe, and enjoyable process! If you are having any problems or if you have any questions about integrating dogs and cats, please contact us for help.

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