

Introducing Your New Dog to Your Resident Cat



Never leave your dog and cat alone unsupervised as dogs can kill a cat very easily, even if they're only playing. All it takes is one shake and the cat's neck can break. Many dogs want to chase and play with cats, and cats usually become afraid and defensive.

Before introducing your new dog to your resident cat, keep them isolated until you get to know your dog and have had a chance to do some preparation and training. Be prepared for the introduction to take several days, or more, and let the cat set the pace. Remember to always proceed slowly and safely, giving your cat space to get away from the situation.

Avoid any interactions between your pets that result in either fearful or aggressive behavior. If these responses are allowed to become a habit, they can be difficult to change. It's better to introduce your pets to each other so gradually that neither animal becomes afraid or aggressive. You can expect mild forms of these behaviors, but don't give them the opportunity to intensify. If either animal becomes fearful or aggressive, separate them, and start over with the introduction process in a series of very small, gradual steps.

Set-up

Give your resident cat a 'safe room', with access to food, water, litter box and bed, where she can be safe and secure from the dog. Your new dog should have a 'confinement area', where he is kept when you're not able to pay 100% attention to his behavior as he settles in to a new house.

Before the Introduction

Practice Obedience

If your new dog doesn't already know the commands "sit," "down," "come," "stay," and "leave it," you should begin working on them, as well as working on attention-getting exercises like "touch" and "look at me." Small pieces of food will increase your dog's motivation to perform, which will be necessary in the presence of such a strong distraction as a cat. Even if your dog already knows these commands continue to practice them with food treats as a reward.

Getting Together

Controlled Meeting

Set up a baby gate (or exercise pen) across the doorway to your cat's 'safe room'. Keep your dog on a leash. Using treats, have him either 'sit' or 'down', and 'stay'. You must have control of the dog. A helper should be with the cat to prevent her from jumping over the baby gate. Begin at a distance, and allow them to calmly watch each other. Make sure to reward your dog with treats and verbal praise for appropriate behavior! If he reacts by barking, jumping, lunging or acting excited, redirect him, ask for a 'leave it' or 'sit', and increase the distance. As good behavior continues, allow them to move closer and investigate each other through the baby gate.

Note: Lots of short visits are better than a few long visits. Don't drag out the visit so long that the dog becomes uncontrollable. Repeat this step several times until both the cat and dog are tolerating each other's presence without fear, aggression or other undesirable behavior. Try to end on a positive note.

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Let Your Cat Go

When they've met nose-to-nose through the baby gate, the cat seems relaxed and comfortable (no hissing or swatting) and the dog is not showing any aggressive or predatory behavior, you can proceed by allowing the cat out of her 'safe room'. To begin, keep the dog on leash at all times, just in case you need to intervene. Make sure your cat always has a way to escape to safety. If your dog gets up from his "stay" position, he should be repositioned with a treat lure, and praised and rewarded for obeying the "stay" command. If your cat runs away or becomes aggressive, you're progressing too fast. Go back to the previous introduction steps. Never allow the dog to chase the cat!

Note: Remember to reward your dog with treats when he shows calm, appropriate behavior around the cat.

Positive Reinforcement

Although your dog must be taught that chasing or being rough with your cat is unacceptable behavior, he must also be taught how to behave appropriately and be rewarded for doing so. If your dog is always punished when your cat is around, and never has "good things" happen in the cat's presence, your dog may redirect aggression toward the cat.

Directly Supervise All Interactions Between Your Dog And Cat. Keep your dog and cat separated when you aren't home until you're certain your cat will be safe.

Precautions

Dogs like to eat cat food. You should keep the cat food out of your dog's reach (in a closet or on a high shelf). Eating cat feces is also a relatively common behavior in dogs. Although there are no health hazards to your dog, it's probably distasteful to you. It's also upsetting to your cat to have such an important object "invaded." Unfortunately, attempts to keep your dog out of the litter box by "booby trapping" it will also keep your cat away as well. Punishment after the fact will not change your dog's behavior. The best solution is to place the litter box where your dog can't access it, for example: behind a baby gate; in a closet with the door anchored open from both sides and just wide enough for your cat; or inside a tall, topless cardboard box with easy access for your cat.

A Word About Kittens And Puppies

Because they're so much smaller, kittens are in more danger of being injured or killed by a young, energetic or predatory dog. Take extra care when introducing a dog and kitten, and never leave a kitten alone with the dog. Usually, a well-socialized cat will be able to keep a puppy in its place, but some cats don't have enough confidence to do this. If you have an especially shy cat, you might need to keep her separated from your puppy until he matures enough to have more self-control.

When To Get Help

If introductions don't go smoothly, contact Homeward Pet Adoption Center or seek other professional help immediately. Animals can be severely injured in fights, and the longer the problem continues, the harder it can be to resolve. Conflicts between pets in the same family can often be resolved with professional help. Punishment won't work, though, and could make things worse.