

How to Introduce a New Cat to a Home With Cats

BACKGROUND

Getting a new cat can be exciting. However, introducing your new cat to your existing cats can be a challenge. Cats are sometimes described as “nonobligatory social animals”, meaning that while cats can establish social relationships, they can also do quite well alone. As long as your cat receives attention and the opportunity to play and exhibit normal feline behaviors, you should not feel obligated to have multiple cats in order to provide your cat with company. Other situations may arise that lead to the addition of another cat to your home: you may inherit a cat from a friend or relative that can no longer keep it, your child may want a pet of his or her own, or you may simply want another cat. While these are all good reasons to add a new cat to your home, keep in mind that the addition of another cat will alter the social order of the cat or cats already living in your home.

Every cat will respond differently to the introduction of a new cat. Cats are territorial by nature. They often resist giving up territory and attention to a newcomer. Each cat, however, has a unique personality. Some are friendly and easygoing and will quickly adapt to the newcomer. Others will react with aggression. Kittens and adult cats that grow up together often enjoy friendly social interactions such as mutual grooming or sleeping together. You should expect these behaviors when you introduce a new cat, regardless of age, into your home if you already have other adult cats. However, kittens are generally easier to introduce than are adults. Your goal should be mutual tolerance between new and existing cats. If your adult cats become friendly towards each other, you should be pleasantly surprised!

There are factors that increase the likelihood of problematic interactions once a new cat is introduced. These include:

- Increased number of cats in the household
- Small home (territory)
- Few places to be alone/hide/low number of high perches
- Lack of early socialization
- Cats that have previously had to compete for territory, food, or other resources
- Genetic factors
- Outside cats can also contribute to aggression, scratch, and/or urine marking.

Factors such as early socialization, genetics, and the cat's previous history are typically out of your control. However, you can always provide each cat with the ability to feel that it is safe and that it has some autonomy and control over its body during the introduction by allowing your cat to get away and hide if it so desires. No cat should be forced into an introduction.

GETTING STARTED

The introduction of a new cat can be a slow process and may take weeks or even months. A slow introduction resulting in a good outcome is much better than attempting to speed up the process and experience a setback. Such setbacks can make true success much less likely in the future. Any overt aggression between cats should be avoided.

The process of slow introduction involves both desensitization and counterconditioning. Desensitization is a method used to reduce a negative reaction to a stimulus through repeated, limited exposure avoiding all signs of distress, anxiety, and aggression. In this case, the stimulus is the new cat. Counterconditioning is a process where the underlying undesirable emotional response to a stimulus is changed to a positive emotional response. This is often accomplished by

pairing the unpleasant stimulus with food. Again, the unpleasant stimulus is the presence of a new cat with the undesirable emotional responses being distress, anxiety, and aggression.

For example, let's say a person is terrified of spiders. You would not throw this person into a room full of spiders and expect this fear to disappear. That would be traumatizing. You may instead use desensitization methods to achieve your goal: first, have the person look at pictures of spiders from a distance, for only a second at a time allowing the person time before showing another picture. Gradually expose the person to pictures for longer and longer periods of time. If at any point the person shows signs of anxiety or fear, stop the exercise. You could also use a counterconditioning approach. Initially for this person, spiders lead to anxiety and fear. If this person is offered \$100 every time he or she encounters a spider, the anxiety and fear may lessen and the excitement of getting extra money might become the primary emotion.

Now let's apply this example to the introduction of your cats.

SETTING UP

- Obtain a wire crate, the kind often used for dogs while the owner is away, to help with the introduction. Cat carriers may also be used. There should be one cage/crate for each cat.
- Obtain extra litter boxes and food bowls.
- Obtain pheromone sprays and/or diffusers (e.g., Feliway).
- High-value food—it should be something that each cat loves (each cat may have a different food)
- Laundry baskets and large blankets

TROUBLESHOOTING BEFOREHAND

- Determine a spot in the house where the new cat can live without any interaction with the other cats for a period of time (days to months). This might be a bedroom, a study, or the like.
- Think through the logistics of litter box placement once the cats are integrated. There should be at least one more litter box than there are cats in the home. Litter boxes that are side by side count as one box. They should be in separate locations and be placed such that one cat cannot prevent access or egress from the box.
- The more resources (litter boxes, food bowls, perches/trees, toys, scratching posts) available, the more likely there will be a successful introduction. The resources should be placed such that one cat cannot “guard” them from another cat.
- All cats should love being in their carrier or crate. If they do not love the carrier, then they must be desensitized and counter-conditioned to the carrier prior to introductions. If the cats do not enjoy being in their carrier, this will create a negative association with the new cat.

PROCEDURE

- **Prepare** your new cat's room/area prior to its arrival. Include litter, food, water, areas for privacy, something to scratch, and ideally an area to climb. Many commercial “cat tree” structures offer several of these things at once. Cat toys and food dispensing puzzles can help fend off boredom while the new cat is confined.
- **Spray** the cat carrier, room, and doorway to the room with feline pheromones (e.g., Feliway). These pheromone diffusers can be used throughout your home.
- **Cover** the new cat's carrier with a towel that has been sprayed with feline pheromones as you bring the new cat into your house. Bring the cat directly into its own room without showing the new cat to your resident cats.

- **Allow** your resident cats to continue their normal routine: they should continue to be free to explore the remainder of your home. Ensure their needs for climbing, play, scratching, food, water, and litter box access are adequately met.
- **Provide** loving interactions to each cat separately. Reward your cats if you notice them calmly smelling the doorway dividing the cats by tossing them treats or kibble. Praise them and give them positive attention. Do not punish hissing behaviors. Continue to keep your cats separate if this occurs.
- **Feed** all cats high-value food on their respective sides of the door. Cats should be eating food regularly prior to the introduction step. Failure to eat regularly can be a sign of stress.
- **Create** a “colony” scent by rubbing a towel or washcloth around the eyes and cheeks of your resident cat(s). Then, use this towel to pet your new cat. Repeat this process with the new cat. Now, this towel has the scent of all of your cats. Repeat this daily.
- **Space-swap** after a period of 1-2 weeks. Place your resident cat(s) in the new cat’s room and allow your new cat to have the run of the house. This gives your new cat an opportunity to explore and to find appropriate hiding places if necessary after the introduction. It also serves as another scent swapping technique. If any of the cats start spraying or marking with urine, continue to keep them separate.
- **Find** the perfect space for introduction. Screened-in patios work well as they allow the cats to be physically separated, but still allow your cats to see each other. Large wire dog crates, cat carriers, a screened door on the new cat’s room, or double stacked baby gates in a doorway can all serve a similar purpose. The location should be a neutral place and should NOT be the room where the new cat has been staying or your resident cat’s favorite spot.
- **Use** another spray of the feline pheromone in the crate or patio before proceeding. All cats should be in their carriers or on their respective sides of the gate/screen/etc.
- **Use** the principles of desensitization and counterconditioning: the cats should be far enough away so that each cat is aware of the other but is not displaying any signs of anxiety, distress, fear, or aggression. The environment and cats must be controlled so that one cat does not approach another too quickly and both cats can be removed quickly without creating arousal or distress. The presence of the other cat ideally should be paired with a pleasurable experience. Gradually increase their time “together” while in their respective carriers, then gradually move them closer together.
- **Allow** one cat out of their carrier. As long as neither cat is showing signs of distress then swap and allow the other cat out (the original cat is back in its own carrier). Repeat this process several times over the next couple of days or weeks to ensure that neither cat is showing signs of fear, anxiety or stress, which may result in aggression.
- **Finally** allow both cats to be out of their carrier and interact with each other. Ideally there should be distractions in the room so the cats do not feel they have to interact only with the other cat. Continue to keep cats separated when you are not there to directly supervise interactions. If any signs of fear, anxiety, or aggression appear, then start the process over at a much slower rate.

AFTERWARDS

Despite your best efforts, there will be cats that simply cannot tolerate each other’s presence. You cannot force cats to like each other any more than you can force people to like each other. It is quite acceptable for cats to simply live in the same home and keep their distance from each other voluntarily, just as you minimize time spent with people you don’t get along with. However, if the cats continue to display aggression towards each other, it may be necessary to continue to provide separate areas for each cat, consider re-homing one or the other of the cats, or seek the advice of a veterinary behaviorist.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

This seems like a lot of time and effort, but I want two cats. Is there a shortcut?

It is generally far easier to introduce kittens than adult cats. Most kittens accept each other readily. Likewise, many adult cats will not tolerate another adult but will tolerate a kitten. Or, you can adopt a pair of adult cats that have come from the same home and are already bonded.

What if things go wrong and the cats start to fight?

Do not attempt to physically break up the fight with your hands; there is a good chance that you will be injured in the process.

Instead, use loud noises, blankets, or an upside-down laundry basket. Try to direct the cats, using a board, cushion, or some other material, toward a doorway where one cat can disengage and retreat, allowing you to shut the door and separate the cats. Cat fight wounds often lead to abscess formation that might require veterinary care, so be alert to signs of illness over the next week or two in either cat.

Cats do not tend to “work things out.” It is important to separate them and start the reintroduction process over at a much slower rate; remember they may never be friends.

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