

Introducing cats to others



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Key points

- Always remember that, even despite careful introductions, some cats never become friends or part of the same social group
- Scent swapping is an important part of the introductions and should not be rushed
- Cats need to always feel in control of the situation, ensure there is adequate hiding places and access to high areas
- Never use your hands or feet to break up a cat fight as this is a good way to get bitten or scratched!

For guests' cats that are under home isolation, your cat will need to spend their quarantine period in a separate area of the home. The process of introductions detailed below (including for example scent swapping) must not start until the cat's isolation period has finished and they have completed the rabies risk management process. The Animal Plant and Health Agency (APHA) will confirm when this period has finished. This leaflet is designed to help you ensure that these introductions go as smoothly as possible following that period.

If you have any problems, please seek help sooner rather than later as it may be easier to resolve a recently developed problem than one which has occurred for some time. If animals have been introduced too quickly, you may need to give them separate rooms and start the integration procedure from scratch. Speak with your vet for further advice who may recommend referral to a suitably qualified behaviourist, such as a member of the Animal Behaviour and Training Council (www.abtc.org.uk). For guests and hosts of cats undergoing home isolation always contact your authorised veterinarian to discuss any behavioural concerns you might have.

Introducing your cat to another cat

Due to their wildcat ancestry, many cats prefer living alone and having the whole place all to themselves. Unfamiliar cats should be introduced very slowly in the hope that in time they will think they're in the same social group, or at least live together peacefully.

Forcing cats together too quickly may lead to long-term conflict and stress which is difficult to resolve – first impressions are all important. Often cats are introduced without sufficient time and resources to successfully integrate. The result can be two cats forced to cohabit under stress. Behavioural problems may result, or they may become withdrawn or intolerant of attention.

Creating a safe space

The change of environment can be extremely overwhelming for your cat. The best way to help them settle into their new home is to dedicate one room of the house as the 'safe' room for them to settle into while they adjust to their surroundings. Your cat's room should contain all the resources they will need and will be out of bounds to the resident cat.

Resources to include:

- food and water. Cats like to drink away from where they eat, so place the food and water bowls in separate areas sited away from the litter tray
- somewhere to hide. It is very important for cats to have somewhere to hide – eg a cardboard box on its side, or under the bed – particularly while they are adapting to a new environment
- a viewing platform. Cats love to view their surroundings from a height. You could offer access to high spots eg shelves, the top of a wardrobe, windowsills etc. Ensure easy access by placing a stool nearby
- somewhere to sleep – igloo beds, cardboard boxes, blankets in elevated places
- toys – be aware that a cat may not want to play while they are settling in
- a scratching post – try placing this near to where the cat sleeps as they often like to stretch and scratch after they wake up

There are no exact timeframes on how long each part of the process should take, but as a rough guide your cat should be in their separate safe room away from the resident cat for at least a week.

Scent swapping

Bringing the cat with a blanket that the cat has been living with aids scent continuity so the cat has something that smells familiar to help them settle into the new home. The use of pheromones, such as a FELIWAY® diffuser, can really help the process. Ideally this would be plugged into the 'safe' room a week prior to arrival.

The most important stage is scent swapping. This should take the greatest portion of the overall process and yet it is one that is often rushed or not considered at all. To collect the scent, use a clean cloth and gently rub the cloth on the cheeks, forehead and sides of your cat. Place this cloth in the middle of the floor in the resident cat's core territory. Do the same for the resident cat on a separate cloth and place this in the middle of the floor in your cat's safe room. By placing it on the floor rather than presenting to each cat, you give them choice. If the cat approaches the cloth, sniffs it, and then ignores the cloth, this is a good sign. Reward the cat with a couple of small tasty treats for this reaction to the cloth to help them form a positive association with the other cat's scent. Conversely, if the cat skirts round the edge of the room to avoid it, then scent swapping needs to continue until both cats are ignoring the cloths. The scent will fade over time so these should be 'topped up' once a day.

Introductions

The more gradually the steps can be introduced, the more likely it is that the cats will get along or at least tolerate one another. Rather than progressing straight to a face-to-face meeting, allow them to first see one another from behind the safety of a solid barrier such as a glass door. Again, you need to consider how to give the cats choice. For example, if you plan to first introduce the cats in the lounge, it is worthwhile allowing your cat to explore the lounge first without the resident cat around so that they can learn the layout of the room, take note of the hiding places and escape routes and are able to retrace their steps back to their safe room if necessary. This will help to reduce their stress levels when they do first meet the resident cat.

Continue to use a small number of treats or interactive fishing rod toy play to help the cats form positive associations with one another. Keep all introductions short (just 5-10 minutes at a time) and encourage your cat back to the safe room once the session is over. If it is going well, many owners may be tempted to extend the visits for several hours, but instead it is best to build up the length of time they spend seeing one another very gradually to avoid conflict. Once the cats are relaxed in each other's presence, it is helpful, if possible, to progress to a mesh barrier that facilitates scent exchange but still provides a safety barrier. If at any point the cats feel stressed by the other cat, then it is best to go back a step or even back to scent swapping.

First impressions

After multiple sessions involving barriers, it is finally time to introduce the cats to one another face to face. As before, little and often is best. Cats are very good at picking up on our emotions so staying as calm as possible will help the introduction process. It is very tempting to stare at the cats at the face-to-face stage, however most cats will find this threatening or, at the very least, off putting. Hopefully at this point, all your hard work will pay off as the cats should be used to the sight and scent of one another. It is worth considering a plan if it takes a turn for the worse. Carefully observe the cats for signs of conflict (without staring though!), such as tail twitching, pupils becoming large and dilated, or staring at one another with ears turned out to the sides. If you notice any such signs you should intervene by holding a thick towel up between the cats. This barrier helps the cats to break eye contact if they are staring at one another and allows them to escape. Never use your hands or feet to break up a cat fight, and avoid picking up either of the cats if they are stressed as both may lead to getting bitten or scratched!

After repeated face-to-face introductions, gradually increase the amount of time that the cats spend together. Ensure both cats have plenty of resources spaced out all around the house; ideally one resource per cat plus one extra. By taking these simple steps you can often dramatically improve the quality of life for the cats living in the house.

For more information, check out our YouTube videos.

- How to introduce cats bit.ly/YouTube-CP-introduce-cats
- Are your cats friends or foes? bit.ly/YouTube-CP-friend-or-foe

Introducing your cat to dogs

Cats and dogs can get along if they are introduced to one another slowly. Below are some tips on how to introduce them. As with cat-to-cat introductions, ensure it is done slowly and at the cat's pace.

Preparation

The cat needs to have their own safe territory with all of their resources where they can settle in at their own pace. It is best to keep both animals separated from each other in the initial stages of the introduction. First impressions count and it is far easier to manage a controlled introduction than try to repair any damaged relationships. Once fully integrated into the home ensure there are plenty of high hiding places around the home so that your cat will be able to get out of reach from the dog. The top of wardrobes and shelving are ideal. You may also wish to install cat flaps to internal doors or use baby gates to create a dog-free zone.

Swapping scent

Breaking down a gradual introduction into little steps makes the whole process easier to deal with from the animal's perspective. While it might be tempting to let the cat 'put the dog in their place', this interaction would be stressful for both animals and not conducive to building a positive relationship. Each of the following steps needs to be repeated multiple times until both animals are comfortable. Little and often is best.

Both cats and dogs perceive much of the information around them through scent, so this is a good place to start! Similar to cat-to-cat introductions, take a clean cloth, using one per animal, to gently collect scent on their scent glands. For cats, rub the cloth on their cheeks, foreheads and sides. For dogs, it is best to rub the cloth on their armpits! Swap the cloths so that the cat-scented cloth is placed in the dog's part of the house and vice versa. By placing the cloth in the middle of the floor, you can give the animals choice and judge their reactions, especially if the cat carefully skirts around the room to avoid the cloth. Reward relaxed behaviour with a small treat to help the animal form positive associations with the other species.

Before working through to the face-to-face meeting, allow the animals to view one another from behind the safety of a solid barrier initially, such as a glass door or windows. Although it may vary depending on the individual animal's personality, it is generally preferable to give the cat the most control over the situation in each of the encounters with the dog. So, allow the cat to choose to enter the room on one side of the glass door and provide them with the option to escape should they feel like it.

Even with the glass barrier in place, it is advisable to keep the dog on a short lead and distracted, for example with a stuffed toy with food inside. A sudden rush at the glass could really spook either animal! Once they are relaxed in each other's presence with a glass barrier, you could progress to a mesh barrier if you have the means to do so.

Face to face

Hopefully by the time you reach the face-to-face stage, both your cat and dog are already starting to get familiar with one another. This is where the 'down', 'stay' and 'calm' dog behaviours really come into their own! Try to keep the dog's attention focussed on the owner to avoid them looking at your cat. Keeping the dog on a short lead will help to manage the introductions. Avoid placing the cat into a carrier as most cats already have negative associations with them causing stress levels to go through the roof! It is vital that cats can run away, climb to an elevated perch or hide in order to feel safe.

Continue to reward both your cat and dog for calm behaviour with small treats and fuss. When both pets seem comfortable, gradually use a looser lead so that the dog can approach your cat. If they are both relaxed, allow them to sniff each other and then calmly call your dog away, praise them and reward with a treat. Over time, you can build up the time spent together. Progress to the dog being on a long lead which can be picked up if necessary. Eventually the dog can be let off the lead. No matter how well the introductions go, the cat and dog should always be supervised together and never left alone. Hopefully with a thoughtful introduction process, they will live in harmony or at least have a mutual respect.

For more information, check out our YouTube video

How to introduce cats to dogs
bit.ly/YouTube-CP-cats-and-dogs

Introducing your cat to children

Much like with introducing cats to other cats or dogs, it is imperative that this is done gradually at the cat's pace. Cats need to feel in control over the interactions and able to escape or watch from afar if necessary. Start as you mean to go on from day one. All children and cats are such individuals with unique personalities and therefore introductions need to be tailored to those involved. Children learn well from consistent, regular repetition and positive reinforcement for gentle interactions with the cat. Keep interactions short so that it does not become overwhelming for your cat, or your child does not become overexcited. Feeding small, tasty treats is an excellent way for your cat to form positive associations with your child. Depending on the child, you may wish to give your cat treats in the presence of the child, or if the child is confident and able to gently throw the treats near the cat, they may wish to do it. Always supervise all interactions between your cat and the child, including giving treats.

By taking steps to prepare your cat and the child properly from the start, you'll have happy children and a content cat, and ultimately help children become responsible and caring adults.

For more information, check out our YouTube videos.

- Adopting a cat with young children - Cats Protection's Kids and Kitties bit.ly/YouTube-CP-young-children
- Preparing your cat for your baby's arrival - Cats Protection's Kids and Kitties bit.ly/YouTube-CP-baby-arrival
- Cats and babies - Cats Protection's Kids and Kitties bit.ly/YouTube-CP-cats-and-babies Cats and kids: dos and don'ts - Cats Protection's Kids and Kitties bit.ly/YouTube-CP-Kids-dos-donts



For more information, please visit
www.cats.org.uk