

Cat: Bringing Your New Cat Home



Adult cats are highly territorial by nature. Kittens are naturally less so, but will still benefit from the following steps to ease their transition into a new territory. Introducing a cat into a new home is extremely stressful for most cats. A cat's basic reaction to stress is to run and hide. You can help ease the cat's stress by providing a safe haven for him.

Step 1. Upon arriving home, set up a small room that will serve as the cat's initial territory. Any small, quiet room works well, such as a bathroom, small bedroom, or large walk-in closet. Keep the cat in the carrier while you are setting up the room, allowing him to adjust to the sounds and smells. Be sure to put everything the cat needs inside this room: litter box, food, water (food and water placed as far as possible from the litter box), toys, scratching post, bed, etc.

Step 2. Open up the carrier and let the cat decide whether he wants to explore or remain inside the carrier. Many times a cat will remain inside the carrier for hours.

Step 3. Give the cat time to adjust to his new territory. Come back to the room to visit often, but let the cat set the pace of the visits. Don't force your attention on the cat—when he wants affection, he will ask for it. When the cat is comfortable in this room (it may take a day, a week, or more) open the door and let him explore the rest of the house at his own pace. Cats usually begin investigating at night, making short explorations interspersed with rapid retreats to their safe haven. It is rare for a cat to explore a new territory without hesitation.

If the cat is allowed to adapt to a new environment at his own speed, everything generally works out in good time. Some cats take days, others will take weeks or months. The length of time needed to establish new territory will depend on the cat's temperament, past experiences, and whether there are other cats or dogs already present in the new home. If no other cats or dogs are present in the household, the adjustment period usually takes one to two weeks, but it may take several months.

Multi-Cat Household

When a new cat is being introduced into a home where there is already a resident cat (or cats), it is especially important to give the new cat a safe haven. Provide the new cat with his own room in which to adjust, as previously described, before introducing him to the resident cat. Choose a room that will not upset the resident cat's routine. This allows both the newcomer and the resident cat time to get used to one another's scents before their first face-to-face interaction as well as safeguard your new cat from passing any shelter-related illnesses to your resident cat. We recommend waiting seven to ten days to make sure that your new kitty has a chance to settle in, get checked out by a vet, and bond with you before proceeding with the introduction.

In the meantime, you can help the cats become used to each other by playing with interactive toys while the door is cracked, feeding the cats treats on either side of the door, and switching the cats' bedding so they can get used to each other's scent.

The best way to let cats meet for the first time is to crack the separating door a few inches and let them sniff each other through this space. Observe the cats while doing this for about half an hour. If one or both of the cats gives a very intense hiss, growl, or swat at each other, close the door and repeat this process until the visits become calm. A little hissing and batting at each other is usually to be expected.

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First interactions. If the sniff visits are going well, it's time to start supervised interactions. Open the door and let the new cat come out and explore. Let the cat come out of the room at his own pace. Forcing the cat to come into a new territory will make the cat increasingly tense and prolong his insecurity. Let the cats enter each other's territory for about a half hour. Then separate the cats and repeat this process a few times each day. If a cat seems overly stressed about the other cat, you can distract the cat with toys or food treats, then immediately separate the cats at the end of the play or treat session. This time apart allows them to be able to process the information they gained while they were together. It also allows them both to regain their sense of territory and confidence, which encourages a favorable interaction at their next meeting. Continue this process daily, lengthening the amount of time they are together a little each session.

Never punish a cat for aggressive behavior toward another cat. Most owners do this thinking they will teach the cat that the aggressive behavior is inappropriate, but it only ends up making the cat more stressed and upset, prolonging the cat-to-cat aggression. The best way to react is either to stay silent, and calmly separate the cats, or to speak softly to the cats.

Patience is key. What we most often perceive as fighting is actually the cats' way of working out their territory. This is an essential part of how cats learn to live together in a multi-cat household and they must go through it. Our intervention prolongs this process. So for the most part let them do what they will and stay out of it. Your anxiety about their interactions can feed their agitation so try to be calm and encouraging, letting them know that they are acting appropriately.

The only times your intervention may be necessary is if their exchanges with each other draw blood or if one is continually chasing or dominating the other one. The best way to intervene is to squirt them with a spray bottle containing water. Ideally you should just squirt the one who is instigating the aggression (and again only if the cat is drawing blood or is constantly chasing the other cat, not for hissing or batting at the other cat). If a spray bottle isn't handy, a loud noise, such as clapping hands, also works well. You never want to get in the middle of a catfight. Cats in the heat of battle can redirect their aggression toward you and cat bites to humans can be serious. The average amount of time it takes for cats to establish the rules of territory with one another is two weeks to two months—although it can take longer.

Household with Resident Dog

When introducing your dog to a new cat it is vital that your dog knows basic obedience. You will need to have your dog under control when interacting with the new cat so he can learn which behaviors are appropriate and which ones are not. It is generally easier to introduce a kitten to a dog, but it isn't necessary for a harmonious relationship. If you do bring home a kitten, follow the guidelines given below, but do not leave them together unsupervised until the kitten is at least four months old and able to defend himself if the need arises.

First interactions. Introducing a new cat to a resident dog is similar to introducing cats to one another (as described in the "Multi-Cat Household" portion above). Without letting them actually meet, you will want to start by giving the new cat a safe haven. Set him up in his own room and allow him to become comfortable. Once he is comfortable in the room, let him explore the rest of the house for short periods each day while the dog is not there.

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Introducing your dog to the new cat. Cats' personalities are directly related to how they perceive and experience their territory. A cat that is comfortable and self-assured in his territory will be more confident and relaxed when confronted with new, potentially stressful situations. When the cat appears fairly relaxed in most areas of the house, let them meet. The best way to do this is to introduce them while the cat is up on a high surface unreachable by the dog (such as a counter or cat furniture), then bring the dog into the room on-leash. Observe their interactions. A dog that is showing overt aggression such as lunging, snarling, growling, baring teeth, etc., cannot be left unsupervised with the cat. Please call the SF SPCA for more behavior advice about your specific situation.

If all is reasonably calm so far, walk the dog around the room on-leash. Let the dog go wherever he wants, but don't let go of the leash in case the dog decides to chase the cat. On-leash interactions give the cat the opportunity to approach the dog if he chooses, or to find his own route of escape. During the first few meetings the cat and dog will probably not interact face to face. Do not ever let the dog intimidate the cat by barking or chasing. Give him a time out each time he acts inappropriately to let him know these behaviors are unacceptable. On the other hand, if the cat bops the dog on the nose as a warning, that is a good sign and should not be discouraged. When they set up boundaries between themselves, they are beginning to establish a working relationship. Let the cat interact with the dog on-leash for about a half hour, then return the cat back to his safe haven. Increase the amount of time they are together a little bit each visit.

Tips

- It is important to be patient and encouraging during their interactions. If you are relaxed, they will be more at ease. Always praise friendly behavior profusely. Don't try to rush the introduction or force them to interact more than either of them are willing. Pressing them to accept each other will only slow down the adjustment process. You should use your best judgment as to when they can begin supervised sessions.
- See the handouts on cat to cat introductions and dog to cat introductions for more information.