

Introducing Your New Dog to Your Current Cat

Many dogs and cats get along well, especially if they've had experience or grown up with each other. Dogs who have never lived with cats are more likely to treat cats like other dogs and try to play with them. Or they can treat cats like prey animals and try to chase and possibly kill them. Similarly, cats who have never lived with dogs can see them as predators and run away or become defensively aggressive. Keep in mind that a dog can kill a cat very easily, even in play. But if your new dog is gentle and friendly, and he's not a squirrel-chasing predatory type, he may be a good candidate for successfully living with a cat. In general, kittens and laid-back cats are good candidates for successfully living with a dog.

It's up to you to protect your cat and set up introductions carefully so that she feels safe and has a pleasant experience getting acquainted with your new dog. Here are key guidelines:

- **Low stress first meeting** First impressions last, so you want the initial meetings to be as stress-free as possible for her. Refresh your new dog's obedience skills before the introduction if possible. The two don't have to be introduced the first day or even week. Key skills are coming when called, sit-stay and "leave it." These will help you control your dog if he gets overexcited around your cat.
- **Doorway intros** At first, confine your cat in a room with her food, water and litter box. Introduce your cat and dog by the doorway to that room. Fill your pockets with treats that your dog and cat love, like chicken, hamburger or cheese. Keep the door open but block it with a baby gate. Walk your dog slowly by the doorway several times each day for a couple of days. Praise and treat him for calm behavior, sitting in front of the gate, and then toss the cat a treat as well. This way, your cat will associate your dog with delicious treats.
- **Train & treat** If your dog overreacts to the cat, get his attention focused on you. Avoid using leash corrections. Instead, ask him to do basic obedience skills, like sit and down. Reward him with tasty treats for his obedience around something as tempting and distracting as your cat! Your cat should be free to approach the baby gate to get closer to the dog or to retreat if she wants to. Toss her a treat any time she approaches the gate.
- **Go at cat's pace** Let your cat set the pace. If she chooses to hide under furniture when you and your dog walk by, let her. In this case, your introductions may take longer, maybe weeks longer. Taking it slow will help to avoid a bad first impression. Cats can take months to form friendships with other animals. Never attempt to force any interactions by holding your cat, putting her into a crate or carrier or restricting her movement in any way.
- **Living room intros** If your cat doesn't seem afraid of your dog as you pass by the doorway of her room, you're ready to introduce them in your living room. Make sure your cat can get away from your dog during the introduction. She should have the freedom to retreat, hide, or jump up on something higher than the dog.
- **Good signs** Cautious investigation and wagging, along with respect (like backing off) when he sees your cat's defensive signals are good signs. Bad signs are instant attempts to chase, out-of-control straining at the leash, whining, barking and agitation. Many dogs will fall somewhere in the middle.
- **Defensive kitty** Cats who have not been socialized to dogs will almost always behave defensively, by fleeing or threatening the first time they encounter a new dog. If the dog does not come on too strong, and if the cat is given dog-free zones to retreat to, many cats will gradually get used to the dog and sometimes even become bonded.

- **Keep dog under control** Keep your dog on-leash during these introductions for the first couple of weeks. Allow the leash to be loose, but hold onto it in case your dog decides to try to chase your cat. Use your dog's recall, sit-stay and "leave it" skills if your dog starts nosing or following your cat and she seems perturbed. When you ask your dog to come to you or leave your cat alone and he responds, reward him with a tasty treat.
- **Reward good behavior** If your dog seems friendly or cautious, not much intervention on your part is required except to praise and reward your dog for his good manners.
- **Interrupt — don't punish** Interrupt any chasing, barking or agitated behavior from your dog by moving him away from your cat. Ask him to do easy obedience skills for food rewards. Avoid scolding, yelling or jerking on your dog's leash. A positive approach is crucial because you want your dog and cat to learn a pleasant association with each other. You *don't* want them to learn that everyone gets tense and angry and bad things happen when the cat or dog is around. Dogs are more likely to engage in chase or prey behavior when they're tense or aroused, and cats are more likely to feel aggressive when aroused.
- **Trim cat's nails** Most cats will accept a young dog and correct him when necessary. Be sure your cat's nails are trimmed before bringing your new dog home so that she doesn't the dog if she corrects him.
- **Separate** When you're not around or can't directly supervise, keep your cat and dog confined in separate areas of the house for at least the first month.
- **Prevent litter box raids** Your dog shouldn't have access to your cat's litter box. If he does, it will be highly stressful to your cat and can cause her to house soil.
- **Feed kitty up high** To prevent your dog from eating your cat's food, try feeding your cat on a high surface, like a window sill, dresser, shelf or cat tree furniture.
- **If kitty scares dog** If your cat is the one pestering, scaring or aggressing toward your dog, keep them separated any time you're not actively working with both to create low-stress, pleasant interactions. Give your dog a cat-free place to call his own and enjoy in peace. (A crate or other kitty-proof confinement area work well.) And give your cat high-up perches to enjoy, such as window sills, cat tree furniture, a cat bed high up on shelving, etc. She'll be entertained watching the dog from above. During supervised introductions, allow the dog to be off-leash so that he can avoid the cat and move to a comfortable distance as he feels the need. Try to redirect the cat to play with you if she pesters or stalks the dog. Setting regular cat play times with you can help her cope with all the changes the new dog brings. It reduces stress by giving her something predictable to look forward to every day and helps reassure her that she's still important in your life.

