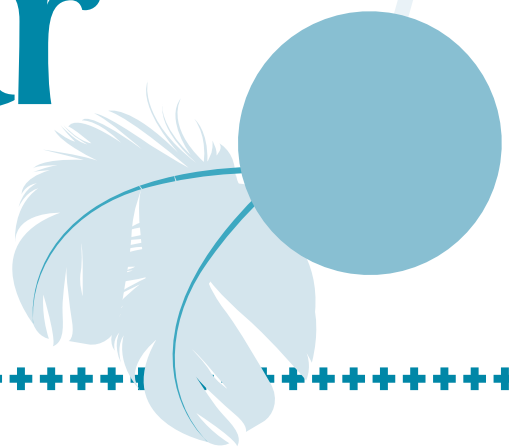


Behaviour matters



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Nicky Trevorrow's meet and greet: introducing cats and dogs

In the previous issue looking at introducing cats, this article follows on looking at how to introducing cats to other four-legged friends! While films often depict cats and dogs being on opposing sides, they can get along provided that they are introduced to one another slowly.

Before getting either a new cat or dog to join the household, it is worth considering both animals' personalities, ages, any medical conditions they may have, their previous experiences of – and reactions to – the other species. Cats and dogs are generally much more likely to get along if they have had positive interactions with one another during the socialisation period. In kittens, this is between two and seven weeks of age, whereas in dogs, it is roughly from three to 12 weeks (although it varies depending on the breed). Even kittens that have only experienced the scent of a healthy, friendly, vaccinated dog on a clean cloth are more likely to integrate well with dogs. While there is a temptation to get a kitten or puppy in the hope that they will provide a new lease of life for an older animal, all too often, the older animal finds the boisterous playful attentions all a bit too much. In addition, the animal's mobility needs to be taken into consideration and their ability to get some space.

Preparation is key

The new animal to the household needs to have their own safe territory with all of their resources where they can settle in at their own pace. Whether you provide a new cat with a sanctuary room, or a new dog with a sectioned off area of the house, 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 a damaged relationship. If the

cat is the current resident, have a good look at the existing layout of your home, exit and entry points and placement of your cat's resources (food bowls, water bowls, beds, scratching posts etc) before the dog arrives. Consider whether any changes will need to be made to accommodate the dog, with minimum disruption to your cat.

If the cat is the newcomer, consider where the resources will eventually be placed in the home once the cat is integrated. It is a good idea to always provide a sanctuary room as a 'cat-only' retreat! 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 allow your cat access to a dog-free zone.

As part of the preparation, it is particularly useful for the dog to know basic commands such as a 'down', 'stay' and 'calm' to facilitate the process.

Scent first

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 its 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.

Dogs and cats
can get along



Photo: Dawn Gibson

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.

Through the looking glass

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 patio door or French 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.

Take your dog on a long, relaxing walk prior to any introductions to burn off any excess energy. 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 Kong toy. 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'

commands and behaviours really come into their own. Try to keep your dog's attention focussed on you to avoid them looking at your cat. Keeping your 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 have the ability to run away, climb to an elevated perch or hide in order to feel safe. A cat carrier or puppy crate will hinder these natural responses and reduce their sense of control.

Continue to reward both your cat and your 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 the 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 line 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. Hopefully with a thoughtful introduction process, they will live harmony or at least have a mutual respect for one another.

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 Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors (www.apbc.org.uk). ●