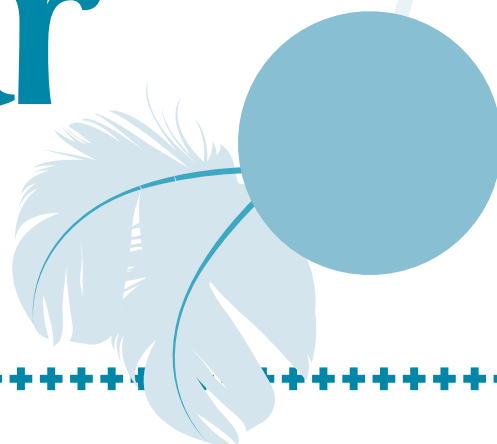


Behaviour matters



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Nicky Trevorrow's meet and greet: cat introductions

Thinking of getting another cat in the household? Before you do, take some time to decide what your current cat will really think about it. Many owners feel that their cat may be lonely and that they need a friend, especially if a feline companion has recently passed away. Certainly this is how, as people, we might feel and we can quickly fall into the trap of assuming our pet must feel the same way. Due to their wildcat ancestry many cats prefer living alone and having the whole place all to themselves.

It can be very easy to think that if you just put the cats together, they will 'figure it out' for themselves. However, the unfortunately reality is that, the most common reason for a newly adopted cat to be returned to Cats Protection is due to poor integration with the resident cat, often within a couple of days of being adopted. This is due to a misunderstanding of what our cats really want. As we have seen from previous articles from *Behaviour matters*, cats are quite complex when it comes to social situations. Therefore in order to set them up with the best opportunity to successfully co-habit, we need to understand a cat's natural behaviour.

If you are thinking of getting a new cat, preparation is key. Here are a few tips on how to give the new pairing the optimal chances of success.

Settling into the sanctuary room

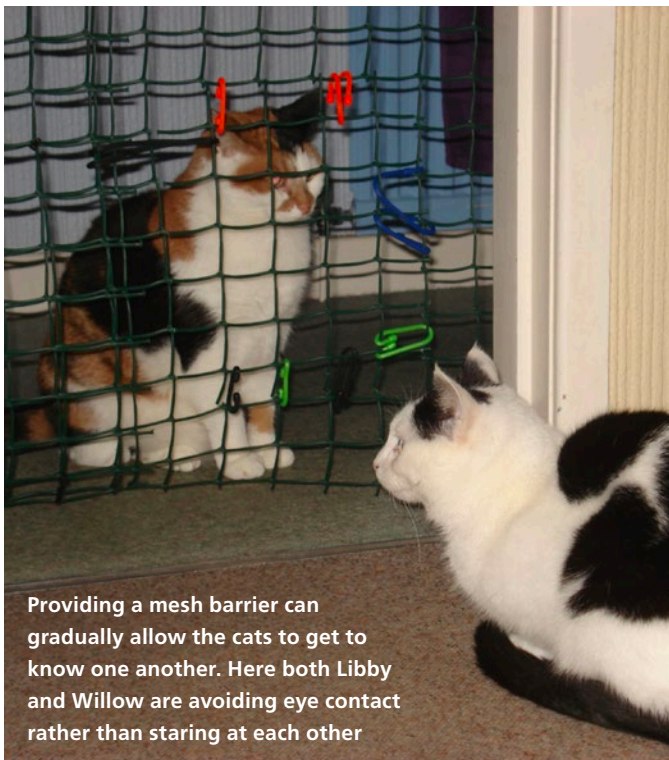
The change of environment can be extremely overwhelming for a newly adopted cat. The best way to aid this transition is to dedicate one room of the house as the 'sanctuary' room for the new cat to settle into and adjust to its surroundings. Spare bedrooms often work well but ensure that it is not the resident cat's favourite room! This room should contain all the resources the new cat will need and will be shut off to the resident cat.

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

Scent swapping

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. Many animal welfare charities would encourage the new adopter to bring in a cloth or an old piece of clothing so that the cat can start becoming familiar with the scents of its new home. Equally, homing a cat with a cloth 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 'sanctuary' room a week prior to the arrival of the newly adopted cat.

To collect the scent, use a clean cloth and gently rub the cloth on the cheeks, forehead and sides of the new 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 the new cat's sanctuary 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.



Providing a mesh barrier can gradually allow the cats to get to know one another. Here both Libby and Willow are avoiding eye contact rather than staring at each other

Brief encounters

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 the new 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 sanctuary room if necessary. This will help to reduce their stress levels when they do first meet the resident cat.

If the resident cat normally has outdoor access, it can be useful to use a patio door as a solid barrier. Once the resident cat is outside near the closed patio door, open the internal door to the lounge to allow the new cat to choose to walk into the room. This is preferable to picking up the cat and carrying them into the room. In particular, avoid deliberately placing each cat close to the glass as this can cause unnecessary stress. Continue to use a small amount of treats or interactive fishing rod toy play to help the cats form positive associations with one another. Keep all introductions short and sweet (just five to 10 minutes at a time) and encourage the new cat back to the sanctuary room once the session is over. If it is going well, many owners may be tempted to extend the visits for several hours, but 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 really 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 count

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 worst. 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 as this is a good way to get bitten or scratched! Also avoid picking up either of the cats if they are stressed as they may redirect their aggressive behaviour towards you in the heat of the moment.

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. Also, including multiple entry and exits points to the house will help to avoid any tension or competition. By taking these simple steps you can often dramatically improve the quality of life for the cats living in your multi-cat household.

If you have problems, please seek help sooner rather than later as it may be easier to resolve a recently developed problem than one which has existed for some time. If cats have been introduced too quickly, you may need to give them separate rooms and start the introduction process 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). ●



Set up a separate sanctuary room with all the cat's resources to help them settle in

Photos: Dawn Gibson