

Introducing a New Cat to Your Household Cats

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In a previous column we talked about some things to consider if you are thinking about introducing a new cat to the cats already inhabiting your home. For example, has the prospective newcomer shown that she is able to get along with other cats? Is she easy-going, adaptable to change and self-confident? Is she friendly towards other cats and people? These same questions should be asked of the cats already living in your home. If the answers to these questions are mostly yes, it is more likely that the cats will get along but there are no guarantees.

It is just as important to make sure that the animals are introduced to each other in a friendly, relaxed and non-threatening manner. Proper introductions of new animals to resident pets can prevent conflicts that will be much more difficult to resolve than to prevent. The most important rule is to go slowly. First impressions are extremely important to cats, so their first encounter must be carefully managed. Don't just bring a new cat into the house and see what happens when the resident cats encounter her. In some cases, this may work, but it is much more likely that the cats will hiss and growl at each other and be either afraid, aggressive or both.

A better approach is to immediately confine the new cat in one room at first, such as an extra bedroom, with all the necessities (food, water, bed, scratching post, toys and litterbox). Encourage the new cat and the resident cats to approach the closed door from either side so they can smell and hear each other. As they do so, offer all of them special tidbits or bring out a favorite toy. The idea is for each to associate "good things" with the other, and to become accustomed to one another gradually, rather than all at once.

Next, switch who is where. Put the resident cat in the bedroom and allow the new cat to explore the house. The next step would be to prop open the bedroom door an inch or two, and allow the cats to get a glimpse of one another. Continue to use treats and toys, and do not allow any closer encounters until the cats are relaxed while looking at each other, without being afraid or threatening. If either cat becomes fearful or threatening, stop the encounter and shut the door. Try the introduction again sometime later after they have calmed down, and don't open the door as wide. After several of these sessions, the cats can be allowed together for brief interactions. With most cats, this technique of brief positive interactions works well. Gradually the time together can be lengthened and the cats can be given more freedom together without supervision. If fearful and threatening behavior continues between the cats, you may need the help of an animal behaviorist.

These same ideas apply when introducing any new animals to each other whether they are dogs, cats, birds or mice. Supervise the introductions, make sure there is no fighting or fear, make the experience pleasant for everyone and go slow. Being patient in the beginning will pay off with good relationships later on.

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