

Helping Cats Co-Exist
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Introducing Cats to One Another

It is never, ever a good idea to just put cats together and "let them fight it out." Because of their lack of submissive behavior, flexible social systems, long arousal times, territorial nature and great individual variation in sociability, such a strategy presents serious initial risks for injury and sets the stage for prolonged, if not permanent social conflicts among the cats. First impressions are extremely important for cats, and an overly ambitious introduction can sometimes require months of behavior modification to recover from.

Introductions cannot progress too slowly. It is always better to error on the side of caution, and assume that the cats may require as much as several months before they can freely be in each other's presence. Certainly many introductions are successfully accomplished much more quickly, but when owners have an expectation of a more prolonged time frame, they may be less likely to rush things.

In addition to educating owners that introductions can be a slow process, you can also prepare them for a variety of outcomes. The cats may become best of friends, they may exist with mutual tolerance, they may actively avoid one another with occasional skirmishes, or one or both may be so intolerant of the other that fights are frequent. There are some cases in which the quality of life of one cat is being so negatively impacted by constant harassment from another cat, that finding one of the cats another home may have to be considered. Hopefully, appropriate introductions can help prevent this unfortunate outcome. A protocol for a cat-to-cat introduction follows.

Helpful Hint # 4-Cat Introductions*

- At first, the cats should only be allowed to smell and hear each other, ***not*** see or touch each other.
- This can be done by confining the new cat to a small section or one room of the house with all the necessities (litterbox, food, water, toys, bed, etc.).
- Place towels with the scent of the other cat underneath each cat's food dish, and on resting places. Rub the cat toys with the scent of the new cat. The goal is to have this scent be associated with 'good things.'
- After the new addition is comfortable in her room (anywhere from several hours to several days), confine the resident cat in this area

and allow the new animal to explore the house, under supervision. This allows each cat to become more familiar with each other's scent.

- Feed, or offer both cats treats close to the door to this room (one on each side). This helps each to associate "good things" with the other's presence. Use "to die for" treats, such as small pieces of tuna, chicken or salmon.
- Try slipping one end of a toy underneath the door to encourage the cats to paw at it or each other in a playful way.
- Repeat these procedures until there are no aggressive or fearful responses, and both cats begin to show some curiosity about the cat who is on the other side of the door.
- Next, wedge the door open, from both sides, about an inch, with doorstops. This allows the cats to peek at each other, paw if they want to, but not have complete access to each other for things to go wrong. Do not progress past this step until the cats can see each other without fearful or aggressive responses. Continue to use toys, food and petting as long as the cats aren't threatening. Touching an agitated cat may result in a bite.
- Next, wedge the door open a little farther, but not so much that the cats can get to one another. Repeat the previous step.
- An ideal next step is to give the cats full view of one another behind a screen or glass door before being allowed together.
- When the cats are first together, keep the session brief, and continue to offer enjoyable things-food, toys, petting.
- If the cats are threatening or fearful when close to either side of the door to the confinement room, offer the tidbits at a greater distance from the door, where both cats can be calm.
- Do not move the introduction along too quickly. The cats should be tolerating each other well at each step before progressing to the next. One bout of fighting may set the introduction back for months.
- During initial time together, if any hissing or conflicts occur, try to distract the cats into another activity-dangle a toy, get the resident cat into the kitchen with the sound of food preparations, etc. If these reactions continue, back up a few steps in the introduction process.
- Avoid having the cats together in a small space, such as a car, until they have become comfortable with each other.
- Supervise interactions at home, and do not allow the cats to be alone together until they are consistently demonstrating friendly behaviors with each other for at least a week.
- Punishment is rarely helpful with cat introductions as it is counter productive in creating the association of "good things" with each other's presence.

- If a fight does occur, try a loud noise such as an air-horn or ultrasonic device, or a water gun to break it up before either cat is injured. This should be used to interrupt the current interaction, not as a repeated procedure.
- Don't try to pull the cats apart or use interactive punishment. If interactions consistently result in fearful, threatening or aggressive behavior, either the introduction was too abrupt, or this is not a problem prevention situation but instead requires problem resolution.
- Keep the resident cat(s)' routine as much the same as possible by keeping feeding, play, and sleeping times and locations the same as before the new cat arrived.

*Excerpt from Pet Behavior Protocols: What To Say, What To Do, When to Refer. By S. Hetts, AAHA Press, Lakewood, CO, 1999.

ADDITIONAL DETAIL

The Importance of Understanding Redirected Behavior

Cats are prone to problems stemming from redirected aggression. Redirected aggression occurs when the aggressive response is directed toward a target that did not initially trigger the response. For example, the resident cat may become agitated by the odor of the new cat confined in another room. Because he cannot attack the new cat, he *redirects* the aggression to another resident cat who is nearby. Because cats can stay aroused for several hours, the release of the aggressive behavior may occur hours after the cat's encounter with the initial trigger. This can make redirected behavior very difficult to categorize as such. Cat owners should be aware of the potential for redirected behavior when they bring a new cat into the home. Cats are also at risk for problems stemming from redirected aggression when they view outdoor cats through a window or door. Other examples of common triggers for a redirected response are: the odor of another cat on a person entering the house, when an exclusively indoor cat gets outside and becomes aroused and anxious, high pitched noises, when a cat is harassed by a dog, and when a person attempts to intervene in a cat fight.

Helpful Hint # 5-Educate owners about redirected behavior

In order to keep owners safe during introductions, they you should educate them about redirected behavior and how to avoid it. If either the resident or new cat becomes aroused and agitated just from the odor of the other cat, the owner should **not** attempt to pick the cat up, or pet him in order to reassure him. This could trigger a redirected response. Instead, they may want to try to engage the cat in play with a toy, or encourage the cat to come for a special treat, in order to decrease the cat's arousal level.