

Introducing Dogs and Cats



BEFORE ADOPTING

Find your pet's perfect match. Before taking the plunge, it's important to know whether the dog you're considering is a good candidate to live with your cat and vice versa. The best possible indicator is confirmation that the dog has successfully lived with a cat before and vice versa.

Audition potential pets. If there is no history of successful cohabitation, the next best thing to do is to "audition" them with the other species before proceeding. Unfortunately, we do not hold dog and cat meetings at our adoption center, since it is a stressful environment and does not often indicate how the animals will act in a home. However, if you have friends or family with dogs, ask them to come over to meet your resident cat. Likewise, ask if you can bring your dog over for a trial meeting with their cat. Dogs who are not well socialized with cats are likely to react as though they were either other dogs or objects of prey. This means they will direct play behaviors, investigation, and posturing at cats or will chase them. Sometimes they will do both, depending partly on what role the cat plays.

If the dog is gentle, relaxed, and friendly, and is not much of a predatory type (i.e. doesn't chase cats or squirrels when outdoors), he is a good prospect to develop a relationship with a cat. Predatory types are much more stressful for cats and must be constantly managed when around the cat if they are to live with one. Predation is a deeply ingrained trait and is not something a dog can be easily trained not to do.

When you audition a dog with cats, do it on leash to avoid overly stressing the cat(s) and any chasing. If possible, use cats with dog experience—they are less likely to flee or become stressed. It's also good to try out the same cat on more than one occasion, as well as trying out more than one cat. Good signs are cautious investigation and wagging, along with respect (i.e. backing off) for cat defensive signals. 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, which will make your decision less clear.

Dog temperament. Sometimes, with diligence and perseverance, a dog with intense predatory drive can be taught to direct it at other outlets and stick to carefully trained rituals and routines when around the cat. However, this is tricky and does not work in every case. Dogs who are less intense are better prospects. It is important to know that dogs can and do sometimes injure and kill cats. Dogs who kill cats are highly predatory and can be easily picked out. A pair or group of predatory dogs is at greatest risk. It's also important to know that most dogs that chase cats are not in this category. Although they chase, they do no physical damage if they catch or corner the cat. The psychological stress for the cat is still present with these dogs, of course, and is an important consideration.

Cat temperament. There is a range of temperament in cats and this is a factor that will influence the success of dog-cat cohabitation. In general, relaxed, laid back cats and kittens are the best prospects to accept a dog. They are also at lower risk to flee and trigger chasing, which will allow a social—rather than a predator-prey—relationship to develop. Shy, skittish and declawed cats are less rosy prospects. Declawed cats are more vulnerable and are more likely to act aggressively when cornered.

Introducing Cats and Dogs *(continued)*

Cats who have not been socialized to dogs will almost always behave defensively by either fleeing or demonstrating an aggressive display 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.

AFTER ADOPTING

If you've decided to blend a dog and a cat in your household, here are some pointers:

Getting ready. Preparation is half the battle. Before you bring your new dog home, be sure to:

Set the stage. Have a "safety room" or rooms as well as high places the cat can access but the dog cannot. Baby-gates, cat doors, and clearing high surfaces can accomplish this. It is important that the cat can retreat and regroup away from the dog, and then venture forward into "dog territory" at her own pace. The cat should have access to food, water, and litter in this area so no interactions with the dog are forced. Dogs should not have access to the cat litter box—it is too stressful for the cat, and the dog may eat cat feces and litter. Most dogs will also eat cat food the cat leaves behind. We suggest feeding cats in the cat's "safe" room or on a high surface.

Don't force interaction. Never force the cat (or dog) into proximity by holding, caging, or otherwise restricting her desire to escape. This is stressful and does not help. Aside from being inhumane, stress is a common reason for behavior problems in cats, including litter box avoidance.

First meeting. For the first introduction, have the dog on his leash in case he explodes into chase mode. If it seems to be going well, take the leash off and supervise closely. If the dog is behaving in a friendly and/or cautious way, try not to intervene in their interactions, except to praise and reward the dog for his good manners. Interrupt any intense chasing and try to redirect the dog's attention to another activity. This is very difficult so you may be forced in the future to manage the dog on-leash around the cat until you have worked out a routine or divided up the house.

Building the relationship. The length of this phase varies from one "sibling pair" to another. Carefully watch both pets' body language for clues before you increase their time together. Until then, follow these guidelines:

- In the first few weeks, observe the trend: are things getting better or worse? Monitor interactions until there is a pattern or plateau in their relationship.
- If the dog is the newcomer, be sure to give plenty of extra attention to the cat so she does not associate this change with reduced attention and affection. If the newcomer is a cat, it's also a good idea to make sure the dog associates the new intruder with good things for him. Always shoot for positive associations.