



Introducing a Dog to a Cat

Congratulations on your new addition! Whether you are bringing a new cat into a 'doggy' home, or a dog into a 'catty' home, how the introduction is done is incredibly important to set everyone up for success.

Setting Up

It is very important to note that **NOT ALL DOGS CAN LIVE SAFELY WITH CATS AND NOT ALL CATS CAN LIVE SAFELY WITH DOGS**. This is something to consider BEFORE bringing a new pet into your home as dog/cat interactions can quickly become dangerous. Before bringing a new animal into your home, ensure you have all the tools required for a safe introduction process. Baby gates, leashes and treats are the basic and required tools, but cat doors can also be used IF the cat already understands how to use them. The cat must ALWAYS have a clear and safe escape route to a safe location to encourage a flight response instead of a fight response. The introduction process should only progress if BOTH animals are comfortable and responsive, so if the dog loves cats but the cat is still weary, DO NOT push the cat and vice versa.

Baby gates are your friend! These are great tools to allow safe meetings between the animals while maintaining a safe barrier so the cat and handler can feel safe and relaxed. Baby gates can also be used to confine the dog to certain parts of the house and allow the cat(s) to be able to explore the house without worrying about encountering the dog(s). There are baby gates with cat doors built in, or the baby gate can be installed a couple of inches off the ground (not high enough that the dog fits underneath) so the cat has escape options.

If baby gates are not an option, cat doors can also be installed in doors to provide the cats with their own room. ALWAYS ensure the cats have ALL the resources they need in their space. This means they need litter, food, toys and scratching options ALL in their 'safe' room or space. This must also be a room that the cat is comfortable in already, so if the cat never spends time in the bathroom, the bathroom is NOT a good option. Try to pick the space the cat spends most of their time in already to limit the stress on the cat.

It is usually easiest to focus training efforts on the dog, even if the dog is already comfortable with cats. The cat only has access to what is in the house, but the dog can (and should) leave the house for adventures which makes it fairer to contain the dog during these introductions. Dogs are also easier to train and manage with treats and leashes. Ideally two people should be present for all new introductions so one managing the cat and one managing dog. If the cat is comfortable with dogs, allow the cat to move around freely assuming the dog is not overly excitable around cats. This should be done with a physical barrier like a baby gate between the 2 animals and the dog should be on leash until both animals are comfortable in the same space.

Georgian Triangle Humane Society

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Teaching your dog impulse control is extremely important and should be done (if possible) BEFORE attempting to bring the animals close together. Check out the 'Impulse Control' Resource for tips and tricks on starting to teach impulse control to your dog.

The Introduction

When introducing a cat and dog, it is always best to have the dog on a loose leash for quick and controlled first introductions. Taut leashes can add extra stress and may add frustration and/or cause some barrier reactivity which may make the introduction SIGNIFICANTLY more challenging (see Barrier Reactivity Resource). If the dog barks at or attempts to chase the cat, the cat may never be able to trust the dog. Bring the dog near the cat and watch the body language of both animals. If both seem calm and relaxed (no signs of stress or calming signals, see 'calming signal' resource for dogs), you can allow the interaction to play out for a couple of seconds (ideally no longer than 10-20 seconds for the first introduction). If either exhibit any sign of stress or excitability, ensure this interaction is only 1-2 seconds long and remove the dog from the space by luring with a treat. TRY NOT to pull the leash to limit the risk of barrier frustration. Allow both animals time to decompress before attempting the introduction again, even if the first attempt went well. If you notice any signs of prey drive (stiffening body, hyper-fixated on the cat, flagging tail, vocalizing) from the dog, end the interaction IMMEDIATELY and seek professional help. If the cat exhibits signs of stress (poofing up AKA piloerection, hissing, vocalizing, swatting, running away) end the interaction IMMEDIATELY and seek professional help. If either animal exhibits these signs, DO NOT allow the dog around the cat for ANY length of time. If the dog is excitable but appears social around the cat, encourage calm behaviours and end the interaction if the dog cannot settle. Work on impulse control with the dog BEFORE reattempting a meeting.

While introducing new animals, ensure its only one at a time! Do not try to introduce 2+ dogs to any cats or 2+ cats to any dogs at a time. This creates extra stress and may lead to redirected aggression onto you or the other animal. Choose the animals (1 cat and 1 dog) you think will be the easiest to introduce first, calmness and confidence are two traits to look for. Keep the others segregated until the initial introduction between the first 2 animals is successful; this may take weeks, minutes or may never be successful.

Cats need toys, high places and enrichment items. It is VERY important to train the dog NOT to eat cat toys, so you do not have to remove all cat toys/trees/enrichment items. You can also leave cat toys in areas the dog cannot get to, if those areas are also areas the cat(s) is(are) comfortable in.

Remember – a cat lashing out is likely afraid! Do not push the cat to this point during any introduction. If you notice the cat becoming anxious (flat ears, swishing tail, vocalizing), STOP the interaction and allow the cat to calm down. If the cat becomes anxious within seconds of seeing the dog, DO NOT attempt the introduction, REMOVE THE DOG QUICKLY and seek professional help. Cats can injure dogs badly if they are uncomfortable and vice versa.

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If both animals appear calm and/or inquisitive, try some positive reinforcement by offering both animals tasty treats on opposite sides of a barrier and praise both for responding appropriately. This can be done for as long as the animals tolerate being on opposite sides of the barrier comfortably. The INSTANT you notice any discomfort or excitability from either animal, end the interaction by luring the dog away with a treat. Reattempt once both animals have decompressed.

The end goal of these short introductory sessions with an excitable dog is to have the dog ignore the cats. If the cat likes dogs and the dog is polite, they can be allowed to interact as long as the cat ALWAYS has a safe place they can escape to (the dog should NOT be able to access this space) should they ever feel uncomfortable.

Puppies and Kittens

When the introduction involves puppies or kittens, similar concepts apply. The dog/puppy should be the controlled (on a leash) animal with the cat/kitten having the ability to escape if need be. It is important to note that puppies and young dogs may accidentally hurt cats/kittens while trying to play, so ALL interactions between puppies/dogs and cats/kittens should be closely monitored. Some kittens are fearless of dogs, in this case, the dog must be watched very carefully as these kittens may attempt to play with the dogs. Dogs and kittens/puppies and adult cats should ALWAYS be supervised or separated as adult dogs/cats can quickly and accidentally injure kittens/puppies. Adult cats who have been socialized with dogs are more likely to 'correct' rambunctious puppies for inappropriate greetings, and this may cause injury to the puppy.

SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP if you are ever unsure during this process. Cats can seriously harm dogs and vice versa. If the initial meetings/introductions go poorly (one animal injures or scares the other), future introductions will require significantly more effort and may never be successful.

Support:

Our Behaviour Support Team can help to provide resources and tips if you experience concerns in the home environment. With your adoption the GTHS will provide an over the phone consultation in order to provide you with tips and resources to set your new dog up for success. In all cases of dog adoptions, the GTHS recommends hiring a professional dog training or behavioural consultant to ensure your relationship with your new dog starts off on the right paw! A list of local trainers is enclosed in your adoption package.

Our Behaviour Support Team can be reached at behaviour@gths.ca

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