

HOW TO INTRODUCE A NEW KITTY TO YOUR HOUSEHOLD

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There are some definite dos and don'ts when it comes to successfully integrating a cat into a new home – whether or not there is already a cat living in the home. We've been through this so many times, we know what works and what to stay away from. I'll write these guidelines assuming you already have a kitty and are bringing home a playmate, but if your new kitty is going to be the only one in your home, you should still follow many of these guidelines. Throughout this document, I'll refer to your existing cat as Cat #1 and your new cat as Cat #2.

With rare exceptions, cats are by nature skeptical of other cats, so bear this in mind. Don't expect to bring your new kitty home, open the pet carrier door, and watch the two cats begin grooming each other. This can be a drawn-out process and, yes, there can be some indiscriminate urination. Keep DooDoo Voodoo nearby.

It's likely that there will be growling and a fair amount of hissing, so be prepared and don't get discouraged if (when) this happens. This is normal behavior and doesn't mean the two will never get along. Hang in there.

It is a good idea to first put away the dishes of food & water so Cat #1 doesn't get jealous if Cat #2 makes a beeline for the food and starts chowing down. After you've done this, take the pet carrier containing Cat #2 to the area of your existing litter box, take him out of the carrier, set him in the litter box and, using his paw, dig around in the box a bit. This lets the kitty know right away that you expect him to use the litter box when he needs to go potty and just exactly where the litter box is. Stand nearby quietly and let him do his business if he feels so inclined. If he does, in a soothing, complimentary way tell him what a good boy he is. Avoid speaking excitedly. The next half hour is extremely important! You want to do everything in your power to create a relaxed atmosphere, as cats pick up on your "vibe" and the introduction will go much more smoothly if they perceive that you're relaxed and confident.

After he's finished getting to know the litter box, kitty will step out and begin exploring. Slowly walk around with him, not urging him to go one way or the other. If there are areas of your home that are tempting, dangerous or would make it tough to pick up the kitty (i.e. if he could hide behind or under something and you wouldn't be able to get to him), close off those areas, confining his exploring to the main parts of your home.

Cat #1 will probably be curious about the newcomer and hanging out nearby. If so, that's good! Curiosity at this stage of the game is a sign that your existing cat is more likely to accept the new cat. If, on the other hand, your existing cat runs away to another part of the house, don't go after him and bring him back to the area where the new kitty is. Cat #1 will come out to observe the newcomer when he's good and ready. Continue to let Cat #2 explore. If he goes to the area where Cat #1 ran, let him, and begin telling Cat #1 in a soothing and relaxed a tone as you can muster what a good boy he's being. Tell Cat #1 that Cat #2 isn't going to steal your affection.....that Cat #1 will always be #1 in your book.

If the two cats get nose-to-nose, you're ahead of schedule. If they sniff each other, then hiss or growl, don't scold either one or separate 'em. They will work out at their own pace between themselves who's dominant and who's submissive. If one of the cats backs off or rolls over on his side, he's probably the one who's going to end up being the submissive one.

It is important that Cat #1 not feel slighted or pushed aside by Cat #2, so don't pet or pick up Cat #2. Pay all your attention to Cat #1 so he associates the new kitty with getting more attention, not less. Continue to speak in soothing tones and tell both of them what a good job they're doing (even if they're not).

Use your good judgment about how the introduction is going. If it seems to be going quite well, roll with it for a little while. If you get the feeling that Cat #1 is NOT a happy camper at all, separate the two kitties and put Cat #2 away in a spare room, bathroom, etc. with his own litter box, food and water so that they can take a break

from each other. It's a good idea not to stay in the room with Cat #2 for too long so Cat #1 doesn't feel slighted. Give Cat #2 a sheepskin, towel or pet bed to lie in.

Leave the room and go spend some quality time with Cat #1, telling him all the while what a good boy he is and how proud you are of him. If he has a special "treat" food (like canned food if he normally eats dry), now would be a good time to give him a little so he feels rewarded for his good behavior. If he's not a big eater, but loves to be brushed, now'd be a good time to brush him. If he likes to sit in your lap and be petted, do that. The key is to do something to make him feel special and rewarded. Sitting on the floor is encouraged.

Give the cats an hour or more to regroup and think about each other.

Does Cat #1 have a pet bed, sheepskin or towel he likes to lie on? If so, after an hour or so of separation, take Cat #1's bed, sheepskin or towel and give it to Cat #2 to lie on. Give Cat #2's bed, sheepskin or towel to Cat #1 to sniff. If he's curious about it, pet him or brush him while he's sniffing it so he associates it and Cat #2's scent with positive reinforcement. If Cat #1 chooses to lie down on the item that smells like Cat #2, you're doing great. If he doesn't take to the item right away, don't sweat it. It's early! If he doesn't lie on the item, but instead goes and hangs around the door of the room where you've secluded Cat #2, that's just as good and means he's curious about his new friend. If they start playfully batting paws under the door, you again have my permission to faint. If so, congratulations are in order; your new family is going to do just fine. If they haven't taken to each other that much yet, no problem. This is normal behavior.

After the cats have had a chance to be apart for at least an hour, if Cat #1 isn't off sulking somewhere and in obvious emotional distress, you can let Cat #2 out of seclusion for another walk around the house. If Cat #1 is sulking, give the separation more time.

If you have a large house with many rooms, don't close 'em all off, but it's not a bad idea to close off some so Cat #2 doesn't get confused about where the litter box is.

Continue speaking positively in soothing tones and telling both cats what a good job they're doing. Do not talk loudly! This would show the cats that you're insecure about their relationship.....just what we don't want them to think. They are going to get along. Speak in tones that show you accept this as a fact.

This first evening of having the cats together isn't a good time to go out to dinner and a movie. You should plan to stay around the house and engage in a quiet activity like reading, working a crossword puzzle, crocheting, etc. Cooking isn't encouraged because many cats get aggressive & defensive when there is food being prepared. Don't play your drums or watch *Terminator 2* tonight. Spend the evening letting the cats explore and get to know each other, separating them periodically if you feel they could use some "timeout."

If you have a spouse or a mate, tonight would be a good time for you two to sleep apart, one with each cat so they both feel loved and special. Don't try to force both cats to get on the bed with you at the same time (unless they want to, which is unlikely), because this generally leads to Cat #1 growling & hissing due to feeling as if his territory (both the bed and you) has been invaded. If you do have a significant other who's going to sleep with one of the cats while you sleep with the other, during the night it'd be a good idea to switch places so you've each slept half of the night with each cat. This gives the cats a chance to smell each other's scent and not feel slighted by not getting their "share" of their two parents.

If the new kitty wants to sleep on the floor away from you, that's ok and you shouldn't force him to get in bed with you. Many times, we'll sleep on the floor with the new cat to show we're supportive of his feelings during this critical time. If you do this, still speak in positive tones to the kitty and don't speak in tones that indicate to him that he's a "victim." You don't want to encourage him to puff out his chest like a bully, but you don't want to do anything that would hurt his ego either.

If you normally feed Cat #1 in the morning, go ahead, but also put a separate dish of food down a few feet away for Cat #2 so he falls in line with your routine but doesn't threaten Cat #1 by eating out of his dish.

If you have any other morning ritual with Cat #1, go through with it and let Cat #2 explore (but keep one eye on him so he doesn't get into mischief or lost). If Cat #2 tries to horn in, pay attention to how Cat #1 responds. If Cat #1 responds favorably, go with it. If Cat #1 gets spooked or aggressive, perhaps you could sit on the floor and pay attention to both cats. Sitting on the floor more at the cats' level shows solidarity with them and lets them know "we're all in this together". If Cat #1 runs away with hurt feelings, put Cat #2 away and go pay some attention to Cat #1. Again, though, don't speak in such a way as to make Cat #1 perceive that he's a "victim."

There are no hard-and-fast rules about how long the pattern of sleeping apart, secluding Cat #2, etc. has to go on. You just have to pay attention to the cats' behavior and pick up on how they're feeling about the situation. Sometimes we've seen it take 3 weeks of this routine for the cats to finally settle in with each other's presence; other times we've seen cats take to each other within the first two hours....or even less a few times. If your situation seems to be more like the three week scenario than the two hour scenario, don't give up or let the cats know that you're losing your patience with them. You've made a commitment to both cats to give them all the effort they deserve. Hang in there.

A Personal Story From A Recent Introduction

There was an eartipped feral female who began hanging around our yard, woods and porch. I worked really diligently to befriend her, but it took a lot of time and effort and she'd only agree to it on her terms. Many a night I was outside in the cold after dark talking to her while she hid in the woods. We'd carry on a nice conversation, even though I couldn't see her, and then she'd sometimes come out of the woods and come up to our porch, where I'd sit talking to her. This routine continued for some time, then we finally figured the time was right to get her into a carrier and take her to the vet. She had other ideas.

After suffering a horrible bite and scratches that required a tetanus shot and major antibiotics, I again began to work at establishing a bond with her. I was able to, then began working to coax her into our garage over the course of a couple weeks. This was arduous work, but I finally got her inside. She immediately melted, proving that our hunch about her not being a true feral was accurate. We got her all checked out at the vet, then began sleeping with her in our guest room. Slowly we began letting our two rescued housecats, Gracie (the alpha) and Wendy (the submissive one) get used to the new kitty's scent by swapping blankets, pet beds, etc. Things were going well; Gracie and Wendy didn't object to the scent of the new kitty, whom we'd named Tipper 'cause she had been eartipped as a feral by someone else (and already spayed, which was great for us). We began letting the housecats peek in to Tipper's room, then began to let Tipper walk around the house while we put the other two girls in a bedroom by themselves. Things were going well, until...

We let Gracie and Wendy finally meet Tipper face to face. Wendy showed up first, and while Tipper didn't back down or hiss or get aggressive toward Wendy, Wendy growled and hissed quite a bit. This died down, though, after 5 minutes or so, and they seemed to be settling in. Then, Gracie showed up.

Gracie immediately lashed out at Wendy, then charged Tipper. As we approached to calm them, Gracie ran toward Wendy and beat the living crap out of her. We separated them, but Gracie kept going after Wendy. This lasted for a half hour, with our constant intervention and calming. We ultimately had to separate them for a couple hours (one with each of us, for additional calming). Then, we got out a can of wet food for them to share, each with her own small plate. This seemed to "reset" the relationship and all seemed forgiven. Gracie slept with me, her favorite human, and wanted to push against me all night, as if it grounded her.

By morning, Wendy and Gracie seemed back to normal.

Here's what we learned: When you have an aggressive, alpha-type cat and a submissive one, don't introduce them face to face with the new cat at the same time. Do it individually so there can be no displaced aggression, such as Gracie exhibited toward Wendy. Get each of the cats individually to accept the new kitty, then work at introducing them together.

Drugs to smooth out your cat's demeanor are one option, but being the natural-centric people we are, we prefer using natural means whenever possible. If this suits your sensibilities, too, here's a suggestion.

While we've used Paxil (the human antidepressant) with success with a couple of our cats, recently we've had extraordinary success at helping cats get along by giving them calming treats made by Pet Naturals Of Vermont. Cats who formerly tried to tear each other apart, and who were having a peeing contest that wouldn't end, are now lying near each other and eating out of the same dish at the same time. Check with your vet to make sure your kitty is okay to eat these calming treats, and use them judiciously, as they're more a natural medicine than a food. You can buy them at major pet supply retailers, some groceries (Kroger, Meijer, etc.) and online at www.SwansonVitamins.com (our favorite place) or www.LuckyVitamin.com. They also make Calming Treats for dogs. We often will break a treat in half, instead of giving the whole treat, as giving the whole treat can overly sedate some cats. Not that they stumble around; they just sleep more. With Calming Treats, more is not better, so be judicious. Even a quarter of a treat might help smooth your kitties out enough to make the introductions go as desired.

What If Things Just Aren't Going Well?

There are some cats who really seem to be meant to go through life without any siblings, but most cats don't fall into this category. While it's true that some of the time cats simply want to be alone, just as some people do, it's also true that they have emotional needs that can only be fulfilled by companionship. Some cats derive this companionship from the people in their lives; others derive some of it from siblings or unrelated friends.

If, after giving the relationship sufficient time and assuring yourself that you've complied with these guidelines to the letter, you feel as if the relationship between your cats just isn't progressing, perhaps it's time to speak with an animal behaviorist. While many of us have years of experience with all facets of cat behavior, an animal behaviorist is someone who actually has professional training in dealing with pets' emotional well-being. We've even consulted with animal communicators, sometimes with excellent results. Our favorite is Mary Marshall (www.medicinehorsewoman.com).

We at Four On The Floor are happy to offer any suggestions we can with regard to animal behavior, but remember that we aren't degreed animal behaviorists and there is a limit to the advice we are able to give. We want to be as helpful as we can be, however, in keeping with one of our mottos: "Helping Pets & People Get Together...And Stay Together." If you'd like to send us an e-mail to see if we might be able to offer you some insight, feel free to do so at info@dodoovoodoo.com.

Don't forget, too, should it ever come to this, that many shelters and rescue groups will take back a companion animal who was adopted from them. They agree to do this because they don't want their pets ending up in shelters, pounds, animal experimentation laboratories or dumped at the side of the road.

The Final Word

There is no guarantee, regardless where you adopted your animal, that introducing it into a new environment is going to go smoothly, quickly and to the delight of all involved. As one cohort of ours in animal welfare once said, "You can't plug in an animal and expect a Disney experience!" Animals have personalities and temperaments just as do people and can take some gentle guidance to "get with the program." Boy, are the rewards great for all involved, though, once the new animal is successfully implemented.

Please hang in there and give your new companion the benefit of everything you have at your disposal to encourage a successful adoption that will last a lifetime. He or she deserves it – and so do you!