

Bringing Home a Playmate for Fluffy: Introducing a Cat to a Cat

Bringing home an additional cat can be a very exciting event for us humans; however, it can be very traumatic for all felines involved. It can end in disaster if not approached carefully!

Cats by nature are solitary creatures. They often exist in the wild in very small family groups of two or three, but each member also needs to have plenty of alone time. Top all of this off with a very territorial nature and you have a recipe for disaster when introducing an additional cat into your home. Cats can learn to enjoy another cat not of their immediate family group. In some cases, they may learn to merely tolerate another cat in their domain. To achieve this acceptance, it is important to take some precautionary measures.

By using the following guidelines below, you can make the transition much easier and have a greater chance at successfully integrating an additional feline into your household.

BASIC GUIDELINES

FOLLOW FOLLOWING STEPS CAREFULLY AND DO NOT SKIP ANY STEPS. The older each animal is, plan on spending twice as much time on each step. It is not uncommon for some older cats (that have never shared a household with another cat), to take 12+ weeks before achieving step six. Younger animals (such as kittens), will often complete the following steps within 10 to 12 days.

DO NOT GO ON TO THE NEXT STEP UNLESS BOTH CATS ARE ACTING NORMALLY; meaning there is no hissing, growling or spitting, and BOTH are calm. Rushing a step may result in aggression, unnecessary vet bills, and a lifetime of an adversarial relationship between both cats!

PAY A LOT OF ATTENTION TO YOUR EXISTING CAT throughout the following procedure, including daily exercise (try a cat aerobics or cat dancer toy). This will help your old cat feel more secure that a new cat isn't going to take away your affection.

HAVE DEFINITE, COINCIDING FEEDING TIMES FOR BOTH CATS. This is going to greatly help with the speed of a successful introduction. Lots of little feedings, many times a day, are more productive than only one or two larger meals.

DO NOT EVER PHYSICALLY HOLD THE CATS AND PUT THEM FACE TO FACE. This is a surefire way to stimulate aggression! Cats are not very forgiving either. If the cats start out on the wrong foot, it is very difficult to undo the damage.

ALWAYS PROVIDE AN ADDITIONAL LITTERBOX IN A DIFFERENT LOCATION. If you have more than two cats, you will need to provide at least one box per cat. This is to prevent territorial disputes over this very important resource. Remember to clean the boxes daily to encourage correct litterbox habits.



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STEP ONE: CONFINE THE NEW CAT TO ITS OWN SMALL ROOM.

This is to be your new cat's "playpen" and safety area. A bathroom, small office, or small bedroom where your existing cat normally does not "hang out," are ideal locations for your new cat's room. Put a litterbox, bed, food, water, scratching post, and toys in the new cat's room. This special room accomplishes several things. First, it decreases the chances of spreading any diseases your new cat may be carrying (remember to keep your new cat confined for 10 days even if you are able to complete the following steps in a lesser time period). Second, it helps your new cat get used to the smells, sounds, and you, without having to confront a "hostile" greeting party (your existing cat).

Provide your existing cat with his own litterbox, bed, toys, etc. in a different area of the house. He may go to the room of your new cat, sniff under the door, hiss and growl, but just ignore him when he does so. **Do not punish him in any way for hissing or growling at this point.** Simply walk away from him. Give him attention when he calms down.

STEP TWO: USE SCENTED FEEDING DISHES.

After your new cat has been confined for several days (and is not hiding from you or acting nervous), take a small wash cloth, rub it on your new cat, and then place it under your "old" cat's food dish just before feeding time. Now do the opposite for the new cat. If either cat is reluctant to eat, try adding something really special to the cat's bowl to entice him to eat. (Or put the wash cloth at a distance from his bowl where he will eat quietly). Gradually over the next few days, bring the wash cloth closer and closer until you can finally put it under both their dishes without any problems.

Repeat at each feeding (always reviving the scent by rubbing on the opposite cat) until each cat eats calmly with no hesitation, hissing or growling. The more feedings you have per day, the faster the process will go. Just feed smaller amounts spread out over the day. Try to do at least two feedings per day, (three or more if possible). The successful completion of this step may take up

to two weeks in some cats or as little as four days with others. **In any case, do not move on until each cat is relaxed.**

STEP THREE: USE CLOSE FEEDINGS.

After the successful completion of step two, place each cat's dish on respective sides of the newcomer's room. Again, feed definite meals to each cat, at the same time, on each side of their door. You do not need to add the scented cloth under the dish any longer. Repeat this process until BOTH cats are acting normally; no hesitation to eat, no hissing, growling, spitting etc., then go on to step four.

You can also help this process along by playing daily with each cat under the door with a cat aerobics toy (a rubber pom-pom looking spider on a wire). In the process of playing, they will put their paws under the door for the other to see and smell. This may help to engage them in play under the door and with each other as well.

STEP FOUR: PLAY THE SWITCH GAME

If you are starting this step, check to make sure you have had your new cat at least 10 days. If it has not been at least 10 days, stay on step three until then. Again, this is for concerns of spreading possible disease. If it is over 10 days and you are still not at this step, do not worry! Go at your cat's pace. Your cat will tell you to move on to the next step by acting relaxed and normal.

Step four puts the new cat's scent all over the territory of your existing cat but without an actual, physical confrontation. This is an important step so do not skip it!

Confine your old cat to a comfortable room with a litterbox and some of his favorite food. Let the new cat out to explore by just opening the door to his room. Do not carry him out; you want him to learn the route to and from his room on his own four feet. Let him wander around for several hours under supervision. Play with him and encourage him to relax. Next, put him away in his room and let your "old" cat out. Your existing cat may walk around the house, sniffing, hissing or growling as he can now certainly smell that "intruder" in all parts of HIS house. This is OK. Let him walk around and act grumpy. Just ignore him or try to

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get him to play with you to help relax him.

Repeat the switch game daily until BOTH cats are acting normally and are relaxed.

STEP FIVE: LIMITED CONTACT

After successful completion of step four, start this next step by putting your new cat back into his safe room. This process will allow the cats to see each other but not make physical contact.

Stack two 36" high-tension gates (baby gates) in the newcomer's doorway, but with about two inches left at the very bottom. (Enough to get a paw under but not a head.) Gates are available at pet stores, children's specialty stores, or department stores. (Or trying borrowing some from your friends).

If you have reason to believe that either cat will get over the gates then use two hard plastic doorstops. Jam the door of the room with the stops, one on each side, with the door cracked open only two to three inches. Make sure that neither cat can fit his head through the opening. Check that the door is secured and will not suddenly pop open or slam shut if a cat body slams against the door aggressively. They should be able to whack each other with their paws and investigate without full body contact. Again, encourage the cats to play through the door by using a cat aerobics toy put through the opening.

Continue the feeding ritual from step four above, but with each cat still on their respective side of the baby gates or jammed door. When you are not home or cannot supervise at least peripherally, close the door. Hissing, growling, posturing should be virtually non-existent before you continue on to step six.

STEP SIX: LET THEM MEET CASUALLY

After the successful completion of ALL the steps above, you are in great shape to now just let the cats casually find each other in the household.

Start first by heavily exercising EACH cat separately, especially if one animal is young and very playful. If one animal wants to play so badly that he harasses the other cat, they can become enemies quite quickly.

Next, get each cat's food dish ready with something really good, like some bits of tuna or a tablespoon of wet food. Just before feeding time, leave the new cat's door open or take down the stacked baby gates. Let the cats casually find each other and then feed them a meal, so they are eating about one foot away from each other.

Next, go ahead and get out a cat toy and play with the cats together. The whole process of step six is designed to associate something really pleasant with having this other cat around.

Some cats may hide; there may be some initial hissing or growling. This is OK. Let them work it out as long as no one is launching a full out physical attack on the other. Keep trying to feed them close together as well, and playing their favorite games with them.

FINAL COMMENTS

DO NOT LET ONE CAT BECOME A BULLY. If one cat always seems to be the aggressor, supervise any cat interaction. Be ready with a squirt bottle set on a straight stream to break up any cat fights. Just make sure it is harassment and not play! Do not leave the cats together unsupervised if you are having this bully problem. Put the bully into confinement when you cannot watch them.

TRY TO EXERCISE THE AGGRESSOR MORE HEAVILY before they are allowed to interact. This often takes off the "edge" and makes the aggressor more agreeable. The aggressor can also wear a harness dragging a six-foot leash under supervision. The harness is so you can quickly remove him from the situation. Again try to associate something positive with having the other cat around, like special treats or play.

If you have not carefully followed the guidelines above, go back to the beginning and start over. Be warned that the introduction may take up to three times as long on the second go around, as you have to go back and try to repair that "bad first impression."

If you continue to have problems even after you have carefully followed the above guidelines, please call the free Animal Behavior Helpline at (408) 727-3383, extension 753.