

How to Introduce Cats to Each Other

Taking your time with a slow, positive introduction process leads to long-term harmony.

The key to introducing cats to each other is to TAKE IT SLOWLY. Take little steps and evaluate how your cats react. There is no magic formula that will tell you when a cat is ready to be fully integrated into the household; you must be able to observe them and judge their progress on an individual basis. Some say their cats got along beautifully from day one (not that they should have even met that quickly), and others say it took six months or more before they finally lived peacefully under the same roof.

Place the new cat in a safe room with litter, food, water (all in different parts of the room, not next to each other), toys, perching spots and/or a comfy bed.

Cats can coexist together most of the time, even if they're not the best of friends, as long as they are introduced slowly and positively and there are enough resources throughout the home. They should never be forced to share coveted basic needs such as food, water, litter, and perches. During the introductory stage, you will probably notice that the original cats in your household are very curious about the other cat behind the door.

They will probably start sniffing under the door and maybe even hissing. Don't be alarmed; it's normal for cats to hiss at something new or something they don't understand. Hissing is a distance increasing behavior. Simply put, it's a warning saying, "Please back off, and do not come any closer." We want to make sure the new cat and the old cat associate good things with that door and what's on the other side of it. Ideally, there won't be hissing!

The following is a step-by-step guide on how to do that.

What Not to Do

Before we discuss how to properly introduce cats, we should touch on some techniques that are quite inappropriate but, sadly, often recommended:

- Do not place the new cat(s) in a carrier or crate and set them on the living room floor where the existing cats can circle (and hiss at) them. This is incredibly stressful and makes the new cats feel like prey. This commonly recommended technique often results in an incredibly negative first encounter
- Do not physically restrain the cats with your hands, a harness, leashes, etc. in an effort to force interactions. That is a great way to increase the cats' stress levels and get yourself injured
- Do not place one cat face-to-face with another cat
- Do not just open the carrier and let them go. These techniques are recipes for disaster!

One Sense at a Time

It is best to introduce cats to each other one sense at a time. Hearing each other is the first, then we move to smell followed by sight. **Identify the HIGHEST VALUE REWARD for your cat and use this exclusively for activity sessions at the barrier.**

With the door closed, start positive reinforcement exercises on either side of the safe room door. Conduct activity sessions (brushing, petting, giving treats or conducting a play, pattern games or training session) for about 10 minutes, one to three times a day, so that the existing cats start to associate the new cat with something they like a lot.

If your cat doesn't like treats, here are some food rewards you can try:

- Plain, single-ingredient meat baby food
- Hill's Rx a/d and Royal Canin's Rx recovery food
- Low-sodium chicken broth, tuna water, or oyster juice
- Deli meats, roasted chicken, or dinner meat leftovers – NO GARLIC OR ONIONS!
- Dairy products: cheese, plain yogurt, vanilla ice cream, cream cheese, or milk (Cats are lactose intolerant, but a small amount can be a snack that can also be a stool softener)
- Cat kibble

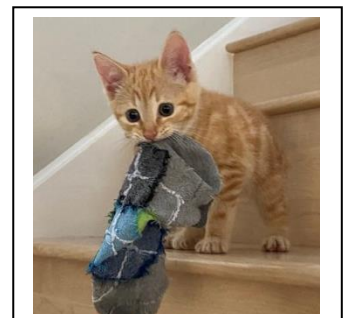
Olfactory enrichment such as catnip, silvertop, valerian, and dried honeysuckle can be used. Use whatever the individuals find motivating; it does not always have to be about food!

Scent Swapping (more smell!)

In between sessions, encourage other positive associations and facilitate scent exchanges (scent swapping). Cats who live together in a group form a colony odor or group scent. When bringing a new cat home, one of the biggest insults to existing cats is that the new cat smells funny.

Some great ways to do scent exchanges are to flip-flop each cat's bedding, swap their toys, and switch out their scratching posts every few days so they can cross scent mark each other's items without meeting.

Wiping the head areas of both parties with a washcloth, old sock, or glove reserved for this purpose is also an excellent idea. At first, we don't want to molest the cats with another cat's scent! Simply rub the jowls, face, and head of one cat with the cloth and then lay it in the other cat's space. This allows them to explore the other cat's scent, hiss at it, rub on it, whatever they choose to do. Observe this first interaction with the scented sock and repeat if the cat has any negative reaction to it (hissing, leaning away, head turning away, or leaving after sniffing sock).



Once there is no negative reaction to the smell of the other cat, then rub the sock on the cheeks and head of one cat then use the same cloth to wipe around the face of any other cats in the house to create a colony or group scent. Go back and forth once or twice. Do this 1-2 x daily for a few weeks as the introduction process proceeds.

Visual Barrier (Sight)

The next step in introducing a new cat (or in a reintroduction) is to create a visual barrier between two rooms. Double-stacked baby gates (or one extra tall one) are probably the most common item used for this purpose, but you can also use a screen door, French doors, or closet shelving that has been zip-tied together — get creative!

Be sure that you have eliminated the cats' perception that they can scale the gates by thumbtacking a sheet or similar obstruction to the top of the doorframe. If they successfully get over the gate even once, it will be more and more difficult to deter them. It could result in a cat fight and many steps in the wrong direction.

Once you've set up a visual barrier, repeat everything you did with the solid door. Ideally play with or conduct games or training with the cats on either side of the barrier. Start the activity far apart and gradually move them closer together. If you reach a point that is too close for comfort for the cats (any growling, hissing, lunging, prolonged staring/gaze you can't break), go back to where you were previously successful for a few sessions before bringing them closer together again the next time.



Always END ON A POSITIVE note, so if there is a hiss, take the cats further away and give them treats. End sessions with a "jackpot" of 3-4 treats.

Remember, if using food, it is just a tool and needs to be something they like MORE than their regular food. Cats are not family-style eaters and the end goal — once the cats are living together peacefully — is to have multiple feeding stations throughout the house so they are not forced to eat side by side.

Move at a pace that makes them comfortable.

Taking a Step Back

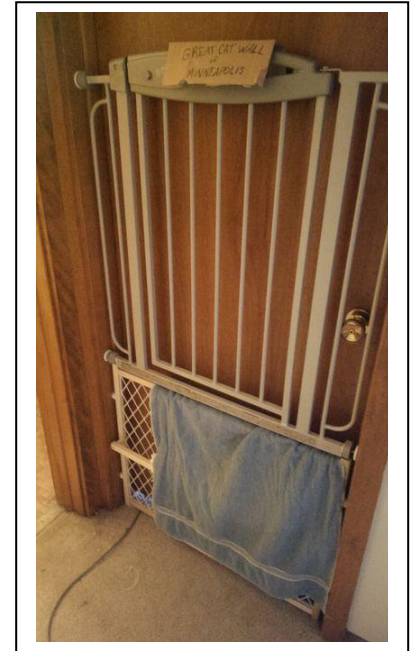
Sometimes moving to a fully exposed visual barrier is simply too much for the cats, and we have to go even slower. To do so, put up your visual barrier, but drape a large beach towel or sheet over the doorway all the way to the bottom so they can only see about an inch of the other room (all they can see is each other's paws). Feed food rewards or play games at the greatest distance you can, given your space. About 10 feet on either side of the visual barrier if your home allows for such distance.

Gradually — every two or three sessions — move closer (about six inches at a time). As that goes smoothly, gradually increase visual sight by lifting the sheet/towel another inch. Continue this way as

long as both parties are comfortable and staying focused on the reward/game. If they start to hiss, or show other fearful or aggressive behavior (ears back, walking slowly or direct staring, or lunging at the visual barrier), move back to where you were previously successful for a few sessions. Do NOT move closer together or increase visual access if they are exhibiting these negative behaviors.

If there comes a point when the more timid cat **will not eat the treats** or approach any closer, try elevating him or her! Encourage the fearful cat to get up on a chair, footstool, or small cat condo. The height will make them feel more secure and in control. Alternatively, move further back and end with treats.

Between sessions, DO NOT leave the visual barrier lifted and leave the cats unattended. This could result in terrible fights through the visual barrier and undo all of your progress. Close the door to the safe room between each session. Try to always end on a positive note.



The session is over as soon as one of the cats is done eating, starts to groom, and/or walks away. Close the door. You are done for now. These short, positive sessions should only take between 5 and 15 minutes in most cases. You want to leave them longing for the next time they see each other, because when they do, something good, fun, or delicious occurs. You are paying your cats to like each other!

Eliminate the Barriers

The next step is to eliminate the barriers. Remember not to force anything. This step could be really uneventful at first, which is exactly what we want. Allow the cats to approach one another at their own pace. Start with activity sessions on opposite sides of a common room. Gradually move closer. Continue using all of the tools that have worked so far: food, toys, treats, and games. Keep the sessions short and end positively.

Gradually increase the amount of time they spend together but keep them separated using a solid door when you cannot supervise. Once cats are comfortable near each other, provide group play sessions.

Overcoming Issues

What do you do if the fur flies despite all of this effort? Have lure toys readily available for positive distraction so that you can easily diffuse the situation. Be equipped with treats to shift their focus if need be. It's helpful to have a large piece of cardboard on hand so you can quickly block them from seeing each other should their interactions become negative. Use this if they are locked onto each other (direct "murderous" stares), get into a spitting match, start to

posture like they are going to charge each other (turning their bodies sideways to appear larger), etc.

Remember, it is best to positively diffuse a squabble. Do not yell at or scold the cats; they are acting normally for them! It is always best to interrupt the behavior and redirect onto an appropriate target. Interrupters should create a “yuck” response and make the cat stop what they’re doing. If you make too loud of a sound and they run and hide under the bed for 2 hours, you have instilled far too much fear. If, on the other hand, they think of the interrupter as a game, it is obviously not effective.

You have to find just the thing that will make them stop in their tracks, think for a second about what they are doing, and then shift their focus onto an appropriate activity (usually an interactive toy). Some examples of good interrupters are clapping hands, whistling or crinkling a noisy plastic bag. There are also remote deterrents like ultrasonic training devices.

Note: Spray bottles are for plants and teach cats nothing. Their use is not recommended.

Once you have successfully interrupted the squabble and shifted focus onto something appropriate, lure the new cat back to the safe room and end the session.

NEVER reach into a cat fight to separate the cats. This can result in a dangerous bite. Instead, use a large towel or blanket to throw over the fighting cats, get them separate and guide them away from each other. Put them in separate rooms for a few hours to cool down after any such interaction.

External Helpers

Calming scents (optional)

Some commercially available products have been created to help ease tension among cats. Lavender, honeysuckle, and valerian root extract are all scents that have been found to have a calming effect on cats. Essential oils can be toxic to cats if ingested, so if you use, offer them in a way that allows for the inhalant calming effects but does not allow them to lick or eat the product.

Feliway is another popular commercial feline product. It works by utilizing pheromones and is available in three formulas.

Feliway (Optimum is recommended) is often used as a “quick fix,” but just like medications, it is not a stand-alone cure. You will get the best results when Feliway is used in conjunction with a behavior modification plan.

Thundershirt or Jacket Harness

The feline ThunderShirt or the **Kitty Holster** walking jacket harness can also be used as an introduction tool, but only if necessary, after other methods have been tried. It can be especially helpful if you have a cat who is acting too aggressively or lunging at other cats. Once they become accustomed to the ThunderShirt/harness, cats can freely move about while wearing it, but it does appear to inhibit their urge to lunge, jump, and even run. The concept is similar to swaddling an infant — creating comfort and a calming effect by tightly wrapping them. The ThunderShirt/harness can serve two purposes: (1) having a calming and humbling effect on the aggressor while inhibiting some of their aggressive displays and (2) building confidence in the opposing party by allowing the two cats to spend time together without the threat of attack.



Nutraceuticals

Sometimes, psychopharmaceuticals can help, but we like to exhaust nutraceuticals first. Composure treats, made by Vetri-science, contain the active ingredient L-theanine, the same ingredient that causes green tea to have a calming effect on humans. Anxitane, made by Virbac Animal Health, contains the same ingredients in tablet form. Finally, there is Zylkene, made by Vetoquinol, a hydrolyzed milk protein derivative known for its calming effects.

Be sure to consult a veterinarian about utilizing these and other medications.

Topical Valerian

Valerian is an herb that seems to act like a sedative in the brain and nervous system. There is a new, topical valerian drop specifically for cats made by Bserene. Although there is no strong clinical evidence, anecdotal evidence shows benefit when used for insomnia and anxiety. You can find these on Amazon.

Reminders for Multi-Cat Households

When you adopt a new furry friend, a cat is not all that you will be adding to the household. You'll need more litter boxes too. The rule of thumb is one box location per cat plus an additional box.

You will also need more feeding stations, water bowls, scratching posts, beds, and cat condos. Even in a small apartment, you can make enough room for your cats by creating more vertical space. With the techniques described here, you can successfully introduce new cats to existing ones. The moral is that we humans are far too anxious to "just see how they do," but taking a little more time in the very beginning will help us