

Multiple Cat Households – How to Introduce Your New Cat!

First impressions are very important for cat-to-cat introductions. It is crucial to be patient and go very slow when introducing a new cat to your feline household. Successful introductions can take several days to several months – your cats will determine the pace. Although some cats may be instant friends, it is better to err on the side of caution and go the slow route. Below are some tips to help you pick the best match for your cat and how to get their new relationship with each other off on the right paw!

How to Pick the Right Cat for Your Household

When you are ready to pick out your new feline it is important to observe your current resident(s) and learn about their characteristics to make the best match. Below are some guidelines that can help you to be a successful matchmaker. You don't have to have all of these in one pet to have a successful multiple cat household, but the more categories that your pets fit into increases your chances of success!

Age:	It is helpful to pick a cat who is close in age to your current cat(s).
Size:	Choose a cat who is of similar size to your current cat(s).
Gender:	Any gender pairings can be successful. However, some male strays who have only experienced negative relationships with other cats may be a challenge to integrate into your household if you have other males.
Activity Level:	It is best to find an equal match for your cat's activity level. Active cats who play frequently may frustrate and annoy a cat who prefers to remain in one location most of the day.
Neutered/Spayed:	It is best that all cats are neutered/spayed. Intact cats may have tense relationships with other cats since they are more intensely affected by hormones than a neutered/spayed cat.
History with Cats:	A cat with a positive history with other cats is best. Many cats can learn to share a home with other cats with a proper introduction.

Pre-Arrival Preparations – The Most Important Step!

Preventing problems is easier than solving them. Preparing ahead of time for the new arrival can help create an atmosphere that is safe and relaxed for everyone. Studies show that cats must respond to environmental changes before responding socially. Therefore, creating a positive environment from day one is vital.



Before bringing your new feline into the home select a room where you can completely isolate the newcomer. This cat “sanctuary” should include a litterbox, food bowl, water and a bed or box with comfortable bedding where the new cat (we’ll call him Newman) can hide. Make sure this room is well-ventilated and has been cat-proofed. It is helpful to have a baby gate set up at this doorway to aid in preventing any unplanned entrances or exits to and from the room. It is also helpful to treat the area around the doorway with Feliway. You may also consider placing a Feliway diffuser in any electrical outlet in and/or near the room where Newman resides.

It may be best to confine your existing cat (we’ll call her Fluffy) before bringing Newman into the house to prevent any unscheduled greetings. When you arrive home with Newman, take him directly to his room. After closing the door, open Newman’s carrier and allow him to begin investigating his new environment. It is best not to try to interact with Newman at this point since he will probably be occupied with investigating his new surroundings. However, you may gently place Newman in the litterbox before exiting the room.

When you do leave the room, be careful to prevent any escapes by Newman and take his cat carrier with you. Place the carrier outside the room with the carrier door open. You may now allow Fluffy out of her confined area. Allow her to investigate the carrier at her own pace. Watch her reaction. She may hiss, attack the carrier, stalk it, growl at it, or sniff it in a curious, relaxed or excited manner. This may happen once or on several occasions. You can provide treats and/or play around the carrier to help foster a positive relationship with the new scent in the carrier.

Visit Newman several times daily. Make sure that you wash your hands after each visit. In addition to being the first step in a cat-cat introduction, this is a safety measure that can help prevent the spread of any contagious conditions that may have been undetected before adopting him.

Building the Bridge One Step at a Time

Before beginning the introduction process, it is important to observe all cats for stress signs during the process. Often cats will hiss, spit, growl, swat, etc. at the beginning of each step of the introduction process. You may also observe other stress signs such as eating quickly then vomiting, excessive grooming/sleeping/drinking, spraying or other inappropriate elimination, meowing or hiding. Make sure that all stress signs have disappeared for at least 48 hours before moving onto the next step. Each cat should be relaxed, calm and happy before moving on.

It is *absolutely critical* that you allow your cats to determine the pace of the introduction process. Any aggressive or negative reactions can set you back to Step 1; so be patient and go slow! If a problem develops, back up to the last successful step and move forward carefully. Do not punish either cat as this could lead the cat to associate negative experiences with the other cat’s presence. In fact, you may want to provide food, treats and playtime only when in the other cat’s presence.

Step 1: Begin first with scent. Rub a small towel over each cat before feeding time. All feeding should now be on opposite sides of the closed door to Newman’s room. Start at a distance where the cats show little to no stress signs. Place Fluffy’s towel under Newman’s food bowl. Place Newman’s towel under Fluffy’s food bowl on the other side of the closed door. Inches at a time, and only when stress signs are gone, move the food bowls closer to the closed door. This allows them to learn about each other through scent while creating a positive association between the other cat’s scent and the appearance of food. Once they are both eating within inches of the door and ALL stress signs are gone, you may move onto Step 2.

Step 2: Carefully switch living areas for short periods of time. Without allowing the cats to see each other, place Fluffy in Newman’s room and close the door while you allow Newman to investigate the rest of the house. This

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allows Newman to learn about the rest of his environment before a meeting occurs. Fluffy can learn more about Newman by investigating his living area. Do this several times daily until Newman appears comfortable and confident in the rest of the house and Fluffy is comfortable in Newman's space. Several short visits are better than one or two long ones. Once ALL stress signs are gone, you may move onto Step 3.

Step 3: Partial visual contact. Only while providing direct supervision, slightly prop the door open and secure it so that the cats can see each other, but are unable to have full body contact. They may be able to touch noses or paw at each other. Feed the cats on opposite sides of this propped door. Stress signs such as swatting, hissing, spitting may occur at this step. Again, several short visits are better than one or two long ones. Try to end the session on a positive note when the cats are more relaxed than at the beginning of the interaction. Once ALL stress signs are gone, you may move onto Step 4.

Step 4: Full visual contact. It is very important to maintain safety at this step. You may use baby gates, large crates (such as dog crates) or harnesses and leashes to prevent any negative physical interactions between the cats. With both cats safely behind a barrier or on harness and leash, feed the cats at a distance where both cats show little to no stress signs. Several short, positive interactions are better than one or two long ones. Inches at a time and only when stress signs are gone, move the food bowls closer together. If you are using crates and both cats are comfortably eating within a few feet of each other you may place one cat in the crate and allow the other cat to roam the house freely. While switching which cat is in the crate, do this several times daily. Once they are eating within a few feet of each other and ALL stress signs are gone you may move onto Step 5.

Step 5: The final frontier – allowing both cats to have free roam of the household. Before starting this step it is a good idea to clip the nails of both cats. If your cat is front declawed, make sure you clip the back nails. You should have one more litterbox than you have cats in your home. Place them in at least two locations to help prevent one cat from ambushing the other in the litterbox. It is also a good idea to pick separate feeding areas (they can be in the same room) and provide separate food bowls. This can prevent competition and help maintain the relationship you have worked so hard to build.

While providing direct supervision, open the door to allow Newman to emerge from his sanctuary. Do not force the cats toward each other, but allow them to approach at their own pace. As long as there is no physical fighting, allow the interaction to continue. Short visits increasing in length are best. When you are not able to provide direct supervision, place Newman back into his room to prevent any injuries as a result of negative interactions.

Once you are 150% certain that Newman and Fluffy are 150% comfortable being in the house together, you may begin allowing them more and more time free in the house together until they are eventually out together 24 hours per day. You have now successfully introduced Newman and Fluffy!

What if a Fight Occurs?

This is a good sign that you have moved too quickly through the introduction process. You may need to start over at Step 1 (or at the last successful step) and begin again with the introduction process.

The first rule is to keep your hands out of any scuffle. If you must intervene, throw a large, thick blanket over the cats during the fight. Pick one cat up in the blanket and put him or her behind a closed door to allow both cats time to calm down. You may also make a loud noise to distract the cats from each other. While distracted, you may use a thick towel to pick one of them up and place in a room.

Often the encounter sounds worse than it turns out to be when examining each cat for physical damage after they have been separated and had a chance to calm down. If you find any bites or scratches watch them closely as

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they can become infected and abscess. If you suspect the bite or scratch is becoming infected, call your vet immediately.

Cats Who Still Don't Get Along

At times medication can help ease the tension enough to allow for the introduction process to continue. A feline behavior specialist along with your vet can help determine the appropriate medication for your situation. Medicating difficult cats during the introduction process can help take the edge off and allow the introduction process to proceed. After completing the introduction process you may be able to wean the cat off the medication. Occasionally, stress signs and hostile relationships return when the cat no longer is taking the medication. Long-term medication (possibly life-long) may be required for them to live peacefully.

Despite all of your best efforts, some cats will not live peacefully with other felines. Each cat has a unique personality and cannot be expected to get along with every cat he/she will meet. You may need to keep the cats separated at all times. Rehoming one of the cats may be a realistic option in such cases.

If your cats are still not getting along after following the steps above, it might be a good idea to contact a professional behavior consultant from IAABC.org to evaluate the relationship between the cats and help troubleshoot the issues you are experiencing in your home. The longer a problem exists, the more difficult it is to resolve it, so don't wait too long before deciding to get help.

Courtesy of Miranda K. Workman, MS, CABC

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