

Feline Introductions: Setting Cats Up for Success

ATLANTIC COAST VETERINARY CONFERENCE 2015

Ingrid Johnson, CCBC (Certified Cat Behavior Consultant)
Fundamentally Feline

When introducing cats to a new home or to other cats already living in a home, it is imperative that we take the process slowly. We need to take appropriate pairings into account and consider the needs of both the new cat(s) and the established cat(s). Provide a safe environment for the new cat to start in, and use positive reinforcement techniques to introduce him or her to the new environment and other cats.

Adopting in Pairs

Cats are a social species. They are solitary hunters but live in groups and are as social as is appropriate for them. In fact, for cats, being related is often more important than simply being familiar with another cat. We are doing cats a disservice by breaking up litters and families and should make a distinct effort to adopt out sibling pairs, mothers with kittens, etc. (Crowell-Davis 2015).

Cats - especially kittens - should be adopted in pairs. It is easier and less stressful for all involved. Change of environment and the introduction of newcomers are the most stressful experiences cats can endure. When two cats are adopted together, they can help each other cope with the changes. Adopting more than one cat also means that the humans do not have to be entirely in charge of entertainment because the cats will have each other.

We also need to consider our cats' lifestyles. They are, hopefully, living with responsible humans who keep them safely indoors, but that means they do not have the same enrichment opportunities as our canine companions. We take our dogs to the park, to PetSmart to select their own toys, to friends' houses, and on family vacations, but our cats just sit on the back of the couch for 20 years, staring out a window. It is a sad situation, especially for a species as social and complex as the cat. Many cats take comfort in having another feline in the home, even if they are not snuggled up on a chair all of the time. It is nice to see your own species once in a while!

Oftentimes, having more than one cat also results in less destructive behavior. They have each other to play rough and tumble with, so they spend less time getting into kitchen cabinets or destroying toilet paper. I am not suggesting that those things won't happen - especially with kittens - but I am suggesting that they will happen less often than they would with one bored kitten who is home alone all day. Kittens adopted together have an appropriate playmate to teach them the ropes, so they are less likely to exhibit aggressive behaviors toward humans such as biting hands and feet (unless this is encouraged and taught). Human hands should be reserved for affection; meanwhile, they can practice their hunting blows on each other. No human or dog can teach a cat, "Hey, you just bit too hard. The game is over now." That is called "bite inhibition," and cats teach other cats this.

Cats learn the majority of their social skills by the time they are nine to 12 weeks of age. Those early weeks are when they learn fear, aggression, and basically how to speak cat. If you miss this key window - say in the case of a bottle-raised kitten or the impulse adoption of a single kitten taken from its littermates at four weeks of age - you can end up with cats who do not know what to do with their own species. I refer to these poorly socialized cats as having

"Tarzan syndrome." It is like raising a child alone in a room, interacting only by passing a food tray under the door, and then sending that kid to college at age 18. Problems will result. The majority of the time, cats with Tarzan syndrome are aggressive and will defend themselves from a new cat you are trying to introduce, because they never learned how to interact with their own species. They instinctively tell the new cat to back off or else! So what do you do?

If you have a client who insists on adopting only one cat, they should be **strongly** encouraged to adopt an adult cat who was raised as an only cat and has no interest in living with other cats. These cats can be extremely difficult to adopt out, as so many families have multicat households. Another common scenario is the person who thinks they want just one cat and then, after a few years, realizes how amazing cats are and decides to adopt another. This rarely goes well. In this scenario, it is often best to adopt a pair of kittens. The existing cat may find them less threatening, and if the kittens do end up being rejected, they will still grow up with each other so that they can learn proper social skills, how to play and spar with other cats, etc. This also ensures that the person does not raise yet **another** poorly socialized only-child cat. We need to break this cycle!

Compatibility

What about adding a new cat to a home with existing adult cats? There are several factors to consider. We humans tend to make a lot of selfish decisions without thinking of the repercussions, and adopting pets is no exception. It is important to try to maximize compatibility. What do I mean by this? Well, if you have a 15-year-old cat, you should not get a single 6-week-old kitten. Nothing could be worse! That kitten is going to get bigger and will want to play and roughhouse. An arthritic, geriatric cat is not an evenly matched playmate. Over time, the kitten will get more and more frustrated and before you know it, there will be a full-on aggression problem. The older cat will run away, which simply evokes the kitten's prey drive, making it seem like a game to play. After all, when caught, the senior kitty probably struggles and screams just like real prey.

If you have a household of healthy adult cats, the world is your oyster - within the realm of compatibility, of course. The key is to adopt cats of similar activity levels and then to introduce them slowly and positively.

A few additional facts to keep in mind: Males like to engage in adolescent play behaviors well into their teens. Females, on the other hand, become much less interested in physical play once they reach social maturity at about two years of age. They still hunt and engage with toys (solo object play) but are not as interested in wrestling, though there are exceptions. Cats' social structure is largely matriarchal (Crowell-Davis 2015), meaning that a female often rules the roost. If you end up with a house full of females, you may have a lot of vying for top-cat position. If you have a cat with a very assertive personality, it may be best to introduce an easy-going, well-socialized male. I call these boys "Big Bubbas" or "Switzerland Cats" because they get along with everyone.

Introduction Process

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 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 be 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!

Once we have our appropriately matched new cat(s), we need to create a safe room for them where they will remain until they tell us that they are ready to start exploring the new home and potentially meeting the existing cats. This safe room should be a cozy area, as cats feel comfort in small, confined spaces. Remember, their species is both predator and prey, so when presenting them with a new environment, it is best to start small and allow them to acclimate slowly. This prevents them from feeling threatened and is especially important if the cat is shy or under-socialized. Hiding places should be available, and the cat should be allowed to come out at his or her own pace. Avoid using rooms where the cats can get under large pieces of furniture such as beds, where you cannot access them, pet them, play with them, or offer treats and encouragement. This is especially important if the cat is timid.

Make sure that all of the cat's needs are met in the safe space. You want to set them up for as much success as possible. Be sure to include at least one scratching post. This is your chance to start them off right, so no puny kitten products! Give them the real thing that you would want them to use as an adult cat. If space allows, try to offer more than one litter box, knowing that cats prefer to urinate in one area and defecate in another. Be sure to offer food, water, solo toys (so they can play when they feel safe), and comfortable, cozy, fuzzy beds.

Once the new cat(s) are eating, drinking, and eliminating normally, it is time to start the actual introduction process. Start with positive reinforcement exercises on either side of the safe room door. Canned food is often a great motivator. Feed canned food on either side of the door two or three times a day so that the existing cats start to associate the new cats with something they like a lot.

What if canned cat food is not enough? Here are some food rewards you can try:

- Single-ingredient plain 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 onions!**
- Dairy products: cheese, plain yogurt, vanilla ice cream, cream cheese, milk
 - *Note that some cats are lactose intolerant, but a small amount can be a delicious snack that can also serve as a stool softener for seniors.
- Various cat treats or even a different dry food as a treat

If the cats do not particularly like these food rewards, try interactive toys, brushing, or petting instead.

Between these sessions, encourage other positive associations as well as scent exchanges. Cats who live together in a group form a colony odor or group scent. When bringing in a new cat, one of the biggest insults to existing cats is that the new cat smells funny. We need to help facilitate scent exchanges. Some great ways to do this are to flip flop the bedding provided for each cat, swap their toys, and switch out their scratching posts every few days so they can cross-scent mark each other's posts without ever having met. Wiping both parties down with a washcloth, old sock, or glove reserved for this purpose is also an excellent idea. What we do not want to do is molest the cats with the 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 each other's scent, hiss at it, rub on it, whatever they choose to do; but we should not rub that cloth all over the other cat's body. Given the sensitivity of a cat's sense of smell, this can be extremely insulting.

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. In fact, some cats will even respond to valerian with the same euphoric response they exhibit with catnip.

Feliway is another popular commercial feline product. It works by utilizing pheromones and is available in two formulas. The original Feliway formula mimics the feline facial pheromone, making cats feel as if they have already marked a certain surface as their own using the scent glands in their jowls. The new Feliway Multi formula uses the pheromone found in the mammary glands of nursing moms, which reassures kittens and helps them form a bond with their mother. The goal of this product is to strengthen the relationship or build a bond with existing cats in the home and make them recognize each other as a more cohesive group. Feliway is often used as a "quick fix," but just like medications, it is not a standalone cure. You will get the best results when Feliway is used in conjunction with a behavior modification plan.

The next step in introducing a new cat is to create a visual barrier. Double-stacked baby gates 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 pillow case, sheet, towel, or similar obstruction to the door frame. 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. Feed meals on either side of the barrier. Start the bowls farther apart and gradually move them closer together. If you reach a point that is too close for comfort, go back to where you were previously successful for a few sessions before drawing them closer together again. Remember, we are using food as a tool, but cats are not family-style eaters and the end goal - once the cats are living together peacefully - is to have multiple feeding stations spread throughout the house so they are not forced to eat side by side. Go at the pace they are comfortable with.

During this phase, I like to allow the cats to explore each other's spaces. Put the existing cat(s) in the new cat's safe room and allow the new cat to explore the home and get his or her bearings. This way, they can discover where food, water, and litter are without the threat of bumping into one of the other cats. This exercise can build confidence. Each case is unique though. Sometimes it is best to put the existing cat(s) in another room so that the new cat can still retreat to the safe room if spooked. This can be done for the first few territory switches and then we can allow the existing cat(s) into the safe room to explore. This gives everyone a chance to hiss and spit and get their frustrations out without taking them out on each other.

The next step is to eliminate the barriers. Remember to not 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, and 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 when you cannot supervise.

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. Remember, it is best to positively diffuse a squabble. Do not yell at the cats or scold them; 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. If you spray the cats with water or make a loud sound and they run and hide under the bed for three hours, you have instilled far too much fear. If, on the other hand, they jump up and swat at the stream of water, it has become a game rather than an interrupter. 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. Other examples of good

interrupters are clapping hands, whistling, or a shake can (pennies in an empty soda can, a noisy plastic bag, etc.). Once you have successfully interrupted the squabble and shifted focus onto something appropriate, lure the cats back to the safe room and end the session.

The feline ThunderShirt can also be used as an introduction tool. 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, cats are still able to freely move about while wearing it, but it does appear to inhibit their urge to lunge, jump, and even run. The concept of the shirt is similar to swaddling an infant - creating comfort and a calming effect by tightly wrapping them. ThunderShirt can actually 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.

Sometimes we may also need the assistance of psychopharmaceuticals, but I like to try to exhaust nutraceuticals first. Composure treats contain the active ingredient L-theanine, the same active ingredient that can cause green tea to have a calming effect on humans. Anxitane, made by Virbac Animal Health, contains the same ingredients but 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.

Introducing Cats and Dogs

Can cats and dogs really get along? Of course they can! I would be remiss if I did not at least touch on this subject here. The first step is having a well-trained dog. Well-trained dogs are happier dogs who better understand their place in the home, and this gives you some control when it comes to introducing a new cat. All of the same steps should still be followed: Take it slow, end on a positive note, and use high-value rewards when they are in the presence of one another.

Here are a few key tips:

- Do not allow your dog to chase, bark at, or pursue your cats in any way. Cats who run get chased because running evokes the prey drive in dogs. This can be a deadly scenario. Dogs pick up their prey and shake it. And while the owners may notice no evidence but saliva on the cat, the cat may be suffering from serious internal organ damage that can lead to death. Cuddling and grooming is fine, but in my opinion, dogs and cats should not be allowed to wrestle or roughhouse together.
- Create vertical space so that your cats can get up and away from the dogs. This is for the cats' sanity and sense of security as well as for their safety should an unsupervised chase ever ensue.
- Create feeding stations up high so that the dogs do not scarf down all of the cats' food. Remember that cats are the most three-dimensionally oriented species we share our homes with, so there are no hard, fast rules about the food dish being on the floor.
- Always offer a separate water dish for the cats. They may drink from the dog bowl too, but cats are very finicky about the taste of their water, and dog slobber could taint it enough to prevent the cats from drinking.
- Put a baby gate up to keep the dog out of the litter box. Lift the gate a few inches so that cats can go under or over it. Hopefully, this will prevent your dogs from reaching the litter box.

Conclusions

With the techniques described here, you can successfully introduce two kittens to one another, two kittens to seniors and adults, two adolescent cats to each other, and cats to dogs. The moral is that we humans are far too anxious to "just see how they do," but if we took a little more time in the very beginning, we could achieve much more harmony in the long term.

References

1. Crowell-Davis S. Social organization and communication in the cat. In: Proceedings of the IAABC Feline Behavior Conference. Atlanta, GA; 2015.

SPEAKER INFORMATION

(click the speaker's name to view other papers and abstracts submitted by this speaker)

Ingrid Johnson, CCBC (/members/cms/project/defaultadv1.aspx?pld=12673&authorId=59721)

Fundamentally Feline

URL: <http://www.vin.com/doc/?id=6991138> (<http://www.vin.com/doc/?id=6991138>)