

Hello, Kitty!

Step-by-step guide to easing new cat introductions.

We did it all wrong. Our introduction of Toby and Sammi consisted of plunking them down together and towering above them, giddily expecting adorable kitten play. Instead, they greeted each other with growls and swats. These, along with frequent bolts for safety occurred for days. Gradually, both kittens became friends and forgave us for nearly botching their relationship from the very beginning. We failed to take into consideration two key aspects of feline personality: Cats are territorial and resistant to change. We did it all wrong, but got very lucky.

Picky, Picky

First, you must select the right candidate. “When choosing a second cat, it’s really important to match the personality and lifestyle of the first cat,” says Nancy Peterson, issues specialist of The Humane Society of the United States. “If you have an older, laidback cat, he is probably not going to welcome an energetic young kitty. You might do much better with a calm cat.”

Opinions vary about the roles that age and gender play, though most experts agree that temperament and energy levels are the primary considerations. Still, there’s no guarantee that even the perfect candidate will bond with your existing cat.

Mikel Delgado, cat behavior specialist with the San Francisco Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, emphasizes that owners should get a second cat as a companion or themselves first and for their existing cat second, in case the cats never become pals.

Its Own Room

Upon adoption, take your newcomer directly to a safe room – a room dedicated solely to the new cat. Provide its litter box, food and water dishes, bedding and toys. Open the carrier and leave the room, closing the door behind you. This gives the new cat time to explore its small territory without the added stress of encountering strangers. Over the next few days, give it lots of love and attention during brief visits, but don’t force yourself on the cat.

Decrease both cats’ sensory anxiety by employing products that mimic feline facial pheromones. Facial pheromones secreted when a cat rubs its head on an object, act as markers of safe territory. “If you have that pheromone already in the environment when a new cat comes into your home, it sends a signal to his brain that it’s a safe and familiar place to be,” says Tammy Senter, marketing manager of Farnam Companies Inc. in Phoenix.

This also eases your resident cat’s misgivings about the new cat’s scent emanating from beneath the door. Reduced anxiety makes both animals more receptive to new situations.

Basic Introductions

Begin familiarizing the cats with each other through a scent exchange. Rub a clean towel on each cat, and then present it to the opposite cat. This enables each cat to launch an investigation of the other without the stress of an actual encounter.

Curiosity will probably draw both cats to each side of the safe room door, so create positive experiences for them while in this close proximity. Feed them on either side of the door, or engage them both with a toy that reaches under the door. “The idea is to start the relationship off on a good foot,” Delgado says. “They’ll think, ‘another kitty’s nearby, but I’m having this delicious treat right now, so he’s not so bad.’”

Kitty Revealed

Now that the stage has been set, you can let the cats get their first glimpse of each other through a cracked door. “Maintain control of the door so you can close it quickly if anyone gets too grumpy,” Delgado says. Although some hissing and growling is to be expected during these initial encounters, slashing and lunging are not acceptable. If these aggressive behaviors occur, back up the process to the closed-door step.

Once the cats grow accustomed to the smell, sound and sight of each other, the next step is what Joan Levergood, behavior consultant for the Tree House Animal Foundation in Chicago, calls territory sharing. Close the resident cat in a separate room and permit the new cat to explore the house at its own pace. It will read the scent left by the other cat, and rub against objects to tag them as familiar and safe. After a time, return the cat to its safe room and allow the resident cat out. Like the new cat, your cat realizes that another cat was in its territory.

“This is similar to the natural state for felines, because in the wild they will have overlapping territories,” Levergood says. “Continue to do this switch once a day – or several times a day if you can – until both cats are completely comfortable.”

The cats can now meet face-to-face under supervision. Open the safe room door so the new cat can join the resident cat in the rest of the house. Although they are no longer complete strangers, prepare for some introduction anxiety. Do not force interaction. Repeat the visits a couple times a day, if possible.

“We should expect a little hissing and argument, and even a little swatting,” Levergood says. “But try to end the visit on a positive note, even if the session lasts only a minute or so, and go back to territory sharing so that they’re both still comfortable in the territory.”

Cat Business

Over time, the cats will develop a relationship on their own terms. Vocalization and harmless scuffles should dissipate as they establish a feline hierarchy. Human intervention usually creates more problems, so stay out of these negotiations. As Levergood says, this is cat business.

However, you can help smooth the waters. Because territorial disputes often cause aggression between cats, create more space. Add vertical territory with a cat tree. Make sure you have more litter boxes than cats, positioned in different parts of the house. Ensure that each cat always has a retreat available.

Immediately stop behaviors such as stalking, play misinterpreted as attack and true violence. Distract the cats by making a loud noise, breaking their line of sight or using a squirt bottle. Punishment will not help, and will only further confuse them. If you can’t phase out these behaviors by going back a step, consult a veterinarian or animal behaviorist.

Left unaddressed, anxiety can manifest itself in other negative ways. It can lead to illness, eating disorders and elimination problems. “In situations where there’s real aggression, you may want to take a pharmaceutical approach,” says Ken Klingman, DVM, a veterinarian at Berthoud Village Animal Clinic in Berthoud, Colo. He adds that medication isn’t a solution itself, but may reduce anxiety while addressing serious behavioral issues.

Introducing cats is not an overnight, or even a week-long process. Klingman estimates that a successful introduction takes an average of six to eight weeks, though it may take several months in other circumstances. For the sake of your household and all its inhabitants, be patient. Rome wasn’t built in a day, and neither are feline relationships.

Introductions at a Glance

Though domesticated, your cat still operates primarily by instinct. Ease introductions by respecting these differences, instead of bypassing them.

- 1) Be patient enough to devote weeks, even months, to the process. Go back a step or two at the first sight of discomfort in either cat, and proceed even more slowly from there.
- 2) Make surroundings more appealing. Extend cats’ territory vertically. Provide separate but equal food dishes, litter boxes, toys, beds, and scratching posts. Employ pheromone-based products to comfort them. Lavish them with playtime and affection.
- 3) Consult a veterinarian or animal behaviorist if their interaction is consistently aggressive, even after you’ve repeated the introduction process.
- 4) Lower your expectations. Two cats living together may become best friends, but sometimes the best you can hope for is tolerance.