

Introducing Dogs to Cats

ARF strives to safely place dogs in households with cats by cat testing each dog over 6 months of age in the shelter. However, the behavior exhibited by dogs in the shelter is specific for the cats they meet in the shelter, and may not be the same for the cats they interact with in your home; behavior changes in different environments, and depends on the individual personality of both the dog and the cat. As such, we strongly recommend the following guidelines when considering adding either a dog or cat to a household with a resident dog or cat.

The personality of the cat

Consider the personality of the cat. Cats that have been raised with dogs, or who are more confident, will adjust more quickly than older and extremely shy cats who have never been exposed to dogs. Very shy cats may run from the dog, which may result in the dog aggressively chasing the cat. Likewise, energetic, playful cats may also pounce on the dog and run from the dog which might cause the dog to chase the cat. In these cases, a dog-free household would be best for the cat. An overly playful cat would do best with a dog that is playful, yet gentle at the same time. An elderly cat would do best with a calm dog.

The personality of the dog

Dogs who exhibit the following behaviors towards a cat would do best in a cat-free household: staring intensely, growling, lunging, chasing, and/or trying to grab the cat in their mouth. Dogs who are cat friendly, yet play rough would do best with confident adult cats. Young kittens may get hurt because of their size. An elderly dog would do best with a calm, gentle cat.

Bringing your ARF dog or ARF cat home

It is not necessary to have the dog and cat meet immediately upon arrival of one of the pets to the household. Several hours can pass before you begin introductions. The dog and cat should be separated from each other when not supervised until you are certain they can safely live together (*to be explained in the following sections*). You can place the cat in a room, such as a bedroom, with a litter box, bed, food, water, and toys. Initially the dog should always be on leash when being introduced to the cat.

Introducing dogs and cats for the first time

Begin with the dog securely on leash and 5-6 feet away from the cat. Watch the body language of both the cat and dog. It would be helpful to have a second person present to monitor the behavior of the cat. If the cat's back arches up, if he hisses or emits a low growl, his tail begins to swish, and/or ears are pinned back then slowly move the dog away from the cat. The cat is not happy with the presence of the dog and may lunge at the dog. The goal is for all encounters to be positive. If the dog's hair on the nape of his neck and along his back goes up (indicating arousal, not necessarily aggression), if he barks or whines, and/or his body stiffens and his gaze fixates on the cat then try to redirect his focus onto you by either asking him to sit, engaging him in play, or by offering him a treat. If he cannot shift his focus from the cat, then move the dog away from the cat. His excitement may be playful in nature, but may also be aggressive. Both pets may need to be desensitized to each other (*see next section*) if these reactions continue. In both cases move the pets away from each other and try again later. On the other hand, if the dog is calm, and his body appears loose and relaxed in the presence of the cat, and the cat is relaxed, then allow the cat to explore freely around the dog (still on leash). Reward the dog for good behavior by either giving him treats or praise, and reward the cat with treats.

Desensitizing the dog to the cat or the cat to the dog

If after a week, the dog's reaction to the cat is still too intense (e.g. the dog's gaze is fixated on the cat, he assumes a stalking position, growls), or if the cat's reaction to the dog is still intense

(he assumes a stalking position or begins to stalk, growls, hair stands up, tail fluffs up), ARF recommends returning the ARF dog or ARF cat to avoid any injury to either animal. If the dog is just overly rambunctious or playful, or the cat is fearful but not aggressive, you can try to reduce their reactions by gradually exposing them to each other. Place the cat in a room barricaded by either a tall baby gate (one that the dog cannot jump over), two baby gates stacked up, or even by a screen door such that the dog and cat can see each other yet cannot access each other.

Two times daily, 5 minutes in the morning and 5 minutes in the evening, sit with the dog by the gate and allow him to see the cat through the gate. Again, have a household member sit with the cat in the room, either playing with the cat or giving the cat treats. Engage the dog in play or even better some obedience training (e.g. “sit,” “down”) using treats. Obedience training will help you maintain control over the dog. Praise both the cat and dog for good behavior (e.g. the dog not focusing on or barking at the cat, the dog engaging in obedience training, the cat not hiding or hissing, eating treats, playing, taking sneak peeks at the dog).

If initially the dog is still too excited just seeing the cat, then close the door. Again, give the cat some treats or engage the cat in play inside the room near the door, and either play with the dog or conduct obedience training (e.g. “sit,” “down”) with him, using treats, on the other side of the door. Once the dog is able to focus you, try opening the door again (with the baby gates in place) and repeat the process.

How long it takes for a dog and cat to acclimate to each other, and establish a relationship, will depend on their individual personalities. Some dogs and cats may only need a few hours, some days, others weeks, yet some may take months. In cases of aggression, cats and dogs may never be able to safely share a living space together. If you’re still having a difficult time introducing your ARF dog or ARF cat to each other after a week, contact ARF immediately.

Supervision

After approximately one month of supervising the dog and cat together, and when you are confident that they will not harm each other, you can allow the dog and cat free reign of the house when you are not home. Until that point, when no one is home the dog and cat should be separated. You can place the dog in a crate if he’s crate trained, and place the cat in a separate room with food, water, and a litterbox.

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