

DOG TO CAT INTRODUCTIONS

BEFORE ADOPTING

Before taking the plunge, it's important to know whether the dog is a good candidate to live with a cat or vice-versa. The best possible indicator is confirmation that the dog has successfully lived with a cat(s) before and that the cat has lived with a dog(s).

If there is no history of successful cohabitation, the next best thing is to gather history on the animals and "audition" them with the other species before proceeding. Dogs who are not well socialized to cats are likely to react to cats as though they were either other dogs or prey objects. This means they will direct play, investigation and posturing at cats or will give chase. Sometimes they will do both, partly depending on what "role" the cat plays.

If the dog is gentle, relaxed and friendly and is not much of a predatory type (i.e. doesn't chase cats or squirrels when outdoors), he is a better prospect to develop a relationship with a cat. Predatory types are much more stressful for cats and must be constantly managed when around the cat if they are to live with one. Predation is not something a dog can be easily trained not to do as it is deeply ingrained.

When you audition a dog with cats, do it on leash, to avoid overly stressing the cat(s) and any flat-out chasing. If possible, use a cat with dog experience – they are less likely to flee or be stressed. It's also good to try out the same cat on more than one occasion. Good signs are cautious investigation and wagging, along with respect (i.e. backing off) for cat defensive signals. Bad signs are instant attempts to chase, out-of-control straining at the leash, whining, barking and agitation. Many dogs will fall somewhere in the middle, which will make your decision less clear.

Sometimes, with diligence and perseverance, a predatory dog can be taught to stick to carefully trained rituals and routines when around the cat, but this is tricky and does not work in every case. Dogs who are less intense are better prospects. It is important to know that dogs can and do sometimes injure and kill cats. A pair or group of predatory dogs is at greatest risk. It's also important to know that most dogs who chase cats are not in this category. They chase but do no physical damage if they catch or corner the cat. The psychological stress for the cat is still present with these dogs, of course, and is an important consideration.

There is a range of temperament in cats. In general, relaxed, laid back cats and kittens are the best prospects to accept a dog. They are at lower risk to flee and trigger chasing, which will allow a social – rather than a predator-prey - relationship to develop. Shy, skittish and de-clawed cats are less rosy prospects.

Cats who have not been socialized to dogs will almost always behave defensively, by fleeing and/or with an aggressive display the first time they encounter a new dog. If the dog does not come on too strong, and if the cat is given dog-free zones to retreat to, many cats will gradually get used to the dog and sometimes even become bonded.

AFTER ADOPTING

If you've decided to blend a dog and a cat in your household, here are some pointers:

- ✓ Have a "safety room" or rooms as well as high places the cat can access but the dog cannot. Baby-gates, cat doors and clearing high surfaces can accomplish this. It is important that the cat can retreat to regroup and relax away from the dog and then venture forward into "dog territory" at her own pace. The cat should have access to food, water and litter in this area so no interactions with the dog are forced.
- ✓ Never force the cat (or dog) into proximity by holding her, caging her or otherwise restricting her desire to escape. This is stressful and does not help. Aside from it being inhumane, stress is a common reason for cats to break litter box training.
- ✓ For the first introduction, have the dog on leash in case he explodes into chase. If it seems to be going well, take the leash off and supervise closely.
- ✓ If the dog is behaving in a friendly and/or cautious way, try to not intervene in their interactions, except to praise and reward the dog for his good manners.
- ✓ Interrupt any intense chasing and try to redirect the dog's attention to another activity – this is very difficult so you may be forced in future to keep the house divided up.
- ✓ In the first few weeks, observe the trend: are things getting better or worse? Monitor interactions until there is a pattern or plateau in their relationship.
- ✓ If the dog is the newcomer, be sure to give plenty of extra attention to the cat so she does not associate this change with reduced attention and affection. If the newcomer is a cat, it's also a good idea to make sure the dog associates the new intruder with good things for him. Shoot for positive associations always.
- ✓ Dogs should not have access to the cat litterbox – it is too stressful for the cat and the dog may eat cat feces and litter. Most dogs will also eat cat food the cat leaves behind – feed cats in the cat's "safe" room or on a high surface.