



Cat Introductions: Setting your cat up for success in a multi-cat home

Properly introducing your new cat with your existing cat(s) is essential, as introductions often lay the groundwork for their relationship. If your current cat has lived with other cats and was always friendly it can be very tempting to just let your new cat out in the same space as your current cat. You may assume they will just work it out, however cats don't always hit it off the right way and a negative initial meeting can set a poor foundation for their relationship. They need you to help them start off on the right paw!

Cat to cat introductions should be done slowly, and with the needs of each cat kept in mind. It is difficult to resist the urge to have the cats meet immediately so they can begin a wonderful friendship, however if you let your new cat loose in the home a number of things can happen with less than stellar consequences.

Your existing cat may feel that his territory has been invaded if the newcomer is just let loose to explore. This could lead to your established cat feeling unsafe in his home and in turn that leads to behavior changes or he could be aggressive (defensive) towards the new cat. That doesn't help either of them!

From the new cat's perspective, she is unsure of where she is. Every scent and sound is unfamiliar and a possible threat lurks around every corner. If you have adopted your new cat, she has likely experienced a controlled number of sounds and smells. She also may be used to living in a small space and while you want her to experience 'freedom', rushing it can leave her feeling very overwhelmed and stressed.

The Beginning:

Start out by setting up a safe haven for the newcomer, ideally this should be done prior to the cat actually arriving. The safe haven should contain the basic necessities such as a scratching post, toys, somewhere comfortable to sleep, food and water on one side of the room and the litter box on the other. You can purchase a synthetic 'friendly pheromone' spray, such as Feliway, at most pet stores and at Buddy's Boutique at the Madison shelter location. Use that to spray the corners of objects to help her feel more relaxed in her new environment.

If the safe haven happens to be a bedroom, it is important to ensure you have provided enough perches and hideaways so she does not spend all of her time hiding under furniture. You can either create or purchase tunnels, so your new cat feels safe moving through the room. Soft music can also be used to lessen the intensity of unfamiliar/stressful sounds outside the room.

It is important to introduce play as a means of confidence building for your new cat and your existing cat. By doing this, you will gain insight into what type of toys and play your new cat likes. Later on, when you introduce the cats and attempt group play you will have the upper hand and your new cat will be more likely to relax and enjoy the time.

When you first bring your new cat into her safe haven, simply place the carrier down and open it. Do not force her out, if she is fearful that will only make it worse. The carrier will already have her scent on it so she may feel safer inside, she will come out when she feels comfortable. If she is nervous she may spend hours inside the carrier before coming out. That is alright, just allow her time alone to acclimate herself to the new surroundings. If she comes right out to explore that is a great start, feel free to spend some time with her but understand she still needs time to check out her new space.

Scent Swapping:

Scent communicating is tremendously important to cats, and they are great at it so your cats will already know there is another cat in the home. To ease their curiosity and keep everyone safe you can use scent swapping to your advantage. Give each cat a small blanket for a day or two and once you know they are laying on it you can switch the blankets. This way, each cat gets a better sniff of the other without having to meet yet. You can also use a sock to pet



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each cat around his/her cheeks and head and place the sock in each other's place. Take caution when placing the blanket or sock, neutral areas are best. The pheromones cats secrete when pet on their cheeks and head are 'friendly' and you can increase the scents 'friendly' effect by lightly spritzing a product such as Feliway on the sock/blanket as well.

Letting 'the new guy' explore:

The next step involves letting your new cat explore her new home safely, while temporarily secluding your existing cat. Initially keep the exploration sessions short, this allows your new cat to check out what she is comfortable with and ending on a positive note. If in a multi-level home, keep her on one floor and close off a few doors so you can control where she goes. Allowing your new cat to check out some of the home while the other cat is elsewhere allows her to not only get the most recent scent information but leave her scent for him to find later. You can do several sessions a day if the new cat is confidently exploring. Each cat moves at his own pace, so this will require your judgment and awareness of his/her body language to decide on how long to do this. Some cats may need several days and some may need a month or more.

Starting to get visual:

You can use a baby gate in place of the closed door to your cats safe haven room in conjunction to food. You can use treats or full meals. The baby gate allows each cat to stay in their comfort zones as well as associating the other cat with something positive. If the cats are handling this stage well, you can move the food bowls closer. Over a period of time (determined by them, of course!) the bowls can be moved as close to the gate as possible. As long as they show no signs of stress and aggression at this point it is safe to remove the gate. Continue feeding for several more days with the door open, and close it after the meal is over.

Game on:

Another step in each cat associating the other with positive things is play time. This step will be done in sessions, short if need be, and include the open door and a fun interactive (wand type) toy for each cat. If you are by yourself this may be a little trickier, so you may need to call in help via a friend or family member. Keep the games short and positive, reward for good interaction.

No longer single, time to mingle:

At this point you have warmed up your cats to each other's presence and if they have had no major disputes, it is time to let them mingle. Time comingling in the home should still be supervised at this time, so keeping the safe haven room intact is still important. It will be up to you to determine how long you need to supervise them before letting them go unsupervised. A few minor instances of hissing if one gets too close to the other is normal, try to distract them with some play and that should ease the tension.

Keep in mind:

Each cat will warm up to their surroundings in due time, which depends on the cats personality. No cats are the same in this matter, so do not be alarmed if there is some hissing and things don't go as you had planned. You have laid the groundwork for a solid relationship by this point, some cats need more time. You may need to go back to the 'starting to get visual' point and hold at that position a bit longer.