

Safe Multi-Species Introductions

Increasing your family of pets? Learn how to safely introduce your cat to non-feline pets.

Don Vaughan

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There's a right way and a wrong way to introduce cats to different species, veterinarians say. Do it properly and everyone should live happily ever after; do it incorrectly and you could be in for a peck of trouble.

The best time to introduce a cat to a new housemate feline or otherwise is when she's young, advises Wayne Hunthausen, DVM, an animal behaviorist and the owner of Westwood Animal Hospital in Westwood, Kan. If a kitten has a lot of positive contact with another species during its socialization period, that will facilitate acceptance of new species later on, Hunthausen explains. Regardless of age, it's wise to keep both animals contained during first contact, Hunthausen says. The cat should be leashed or in a carrier, and the other animal should also be controlled so that neither pet gets hurt if the first meeting doesn't go well. Once the animals have accepted each other, you can let them mingle together but never leave a cat with another species unsupervised. It may take a little while for your cat and the other animal to accept each other, so you'll need to be patient. Most importantly, Hunthausen says, don't try to force your pets to become friends. It can be dangerous to introduce a cat and dog (or other animal) nose to nose while holding them, Hunthausen warns. Some cats, if forced face to face with something that frightens them, will lash out. That just makes things worse, and someone could get hurt. So go slowly and keep everyone under control until you're comfortable with what's going on. If both animals stay calm and the introduction goes smoothly, reinforce that positive behavior with a treat, Hunthausen suggests. But don't punish negative behavior, such as hissing or growling, because it won't help. All you'll succeed in doing is making your pet more stressed.