

Cat and Dog Introductions

CatChannel behavior expert Marilyn Krieger, CCBC, explains how to make animal introductions go smoothly.

By Marilyn Krieger

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Q: My wife recently brought home a cat. We also have a 3-year-old Jack Russell Terrier mix. Should we be concerned about having the two in the same house? So far, the dog is curious about the cat and not aggressive. I think everything will be OK, but I'm a little concerned about later on. What can we do to prevent problems?

A: Before introducing your Jack Russell to the new cat, train the dog to not chase cats, to sit on request and to know and respond to the request "leave it." Dogs are stronger than cats and can hurt or kill them, so the introductions have to be done gradually and safely.

Keep your new cat separate from the dog for one week or longer. The amount of time the cat is confined away from the dog will depend on how the dog responds to cats, his training and to how both the cat and the dog respond in the introduction process.

Before starting the introductions, make sure your house is set up with safe refuge areas for the cat -- tall cat trees, easily accessible shelves and counters. Every room will need them. These areas are available to the cat, but off-limits to the dog.

The cat should have his own room, a location that is dog-free, where he can feel safe. While he is confined away from the dog, start the introductions by first petting the dog with a clean towel and bringing the towel into the cat's room. Pet the cat gently with another clean towel and place it in the dog's area. Repeat this every day that the cat is separated from the dog.

After both the cat and dog are at ease with the other's scents, start to introduce them. If the dog is crate trained, confine him to his crate and allow the cat to explore on his own, smelling the crate, interacting with the dog through the crate, if he chooses to do so. Don't force the cat to interact or go up to the dog. This must be done on the cat's schedule, according to the cat's comfort level. If your dog is not crate trained, put a leash and harness on him. Ask the dog to sit quietly by your side while you hold him on leash. Ideally, there should be another person who can help, overseeing the cat portion of the introductions, and intervening if necessary. When your dog is calmly sitting next to you, your friend should open the door to the cat's confinement room, allowing the cat to explore the room and to approach the dog as he chooses. If possible, repeat this exercise multiple times every day until the cat and the dog are comfortable with each other, displaying no signs of aggression or fear. If your dog is crate trained and after the cat and the dog are interacting peacefully, let the dog out of the crate, controlling him with a leash.

The next step is supervised and controlled visits. Put a baby gate on the entrance of the cat's room. The baby gate will allow the cat to explore outside of his room and not allow the dog access to the cat's safe room. This exercise should only be done when there is someone around to supervise the visits.

Please remember that since dogs can easily hurt or kill a cat, they should never be left together unsupervised. Safety should always be the priority.