

Cat Meets Kitten

CatChannel behavior expert Marilyn Krieger, CCBC, explains how to properly introduce cats.

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Q: Our six-year-old male cat used to live with another cat for a couple of years and has now been living with us as the only cat in the household for two years. We are about to move into a new house and thought that this might be the ideal time to try to introduce him to a second cat. We have bought a little 7-week-old female kitten, and she is currently being held for us. We hope to move in about a week and are wondering what will be the best means to introduce our cat to the kitten.

A: Since you are moving to a new house, it's important that both your cat and the new kitten feel safe in their new home before starting the introductions. To ease the anxiety of being in a new environment and to help the cat and kitten feel secure, confine them in separate rooms. Each room needs to be comfortable with a place to sleep, food, water, a view out of a window and plenty of environmental enrichment such as interactive toys and cat furniture.

Additionally, both cats will need plenty of attention and reassurance from you and the rest of your family. After the cats have adjusted to their rooms, let your cat explore different parts of the house while the kitten is confined to her room. Do not start the introduction process until both cats feel secure and safe in their new home.

One of the best ways to introduce stranger cats to each other is to encourage positive experiences and associations between them even before they meet each other. Look at this as the cat version of e-mails or phone calls.

Start the introduction process by exchanging pheromones between the cats. Take clean socks and gently pet each cat on the cheek with a sock. Exchange socks, putting the other cat's sock in the other one's room. This should be done a couple of times a day for a week or longer (depending on the cats' responses). Clean socks need to be used on each cat at every pheromone exchange event. When both cats are relaxed around the other's sock, feed them treats simultaneously a couple of times every day while they are still separated by the closed door. After the cats are happily eating treats next to each other with the closed door between them, encourage them to play with each other by putting a double-ended toy under the door. Gradually, add more experiences that they can enjoy together without being together. All of these activities need to be done over a period of days, maybe weeks.

The first encounter will be a nose encounter. Crack open the door about ½ to 1 inch. Wedge your foot so that neither cat can push the door open. The door should be open just enough for them to touch noses. After a few days or weeks of happy nose encounters, the door can be opened for their first meeting during mealtime. Feed them at the same time, but far enough away that they can see and hear each other. Right after they eat, close the door. Over time, gradually increase the time that the door remains opened. Make sure to supervise them during these first encounters. At any sign of anxiety or aggression, separate them and take it slower.

Properly introducing cats to each other takes time. It's important to remember that in order to be successful, it must be done on the cat's schedule and not yours. That means it could take a couple of months or longer until the cats accept each other.