

Cats Don't Get Along

CatChannel behavior expert Marilyn Krieger explains how to introduce a new cat to the household.

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Q: We have had our cat Half-Pint since she was about 4 weeks old. She is now 5 years old. Recently, we got a new female kitten named Lulu who Half-Pint hisses and growls at. I'm afraid she will hurt Lulu. Half-Pint has had litters but is spayed now. How do I get her to accept Lulu?

A: Half-Pint's behavior is perfectly understandable since she has been the queen of your household for the last 5 years. It's natural for cats to react negatively toward a newcomer when they are introduced to each other too quickly. Proper introductions can take a month or longer and need to be done slowly, on the cat's schedule. Even though Half-Pint has already had unpleasant meetings with Lulu, the two cats should be re-introduced gradually to each other.

Start by separating the two of them, giving Lulu her own safe room. Half-Pint should not be allowed into the room. This room will be Lulu's sanctuary. The goal is for the cats, especially Half-Pint, to build a positive and friendly relationship through a series of activities they will participate in, while separated from each other.

In addition to following the steps for properly introducing cats to each other, outlined in the column "How to Create a Peaceful Multicat Household" make sure the environment is set up in such a way to promote peace when the cats finally start to integrate together in the future. Be patient; it might be a month or two before the cats can be in the same room together.

When the time finally comes when they can start to be together, there will need to be plenty of "vertical territory" – high places with different levels that are accessible to both cats. These can be tall cat trees, shelves or existing furniture such as tall book cases and armoires. Ideally the highest access point should be at least 5 to 6 feet off the ground. These high spots should be located in the rooms where you and the cats like to hang out. Cat furniture or other freestanding pieces of furniture need to be secure and sturdy so that they don't accidentally tip over. The high territory will help the cats promote peace in the household since cats show their hierarchy to each other and the world by where they are sitting in relationship to each other. It's not a static hierarchy. Cats take turns. You might find one cat at the top of a cat tree in the early morning and then find the other cat in the same location later in the day. Or both cats might be lounging on top shelves in different rooms.

In addition to high places to climb and perch, provide boxes, tunnels and other covered places throughout the house where the cats can hide, sleep or play. Paper bags with the handles cut off can also work as areas to play and explore. Ideally, there should also be covered areas located up high as well. Cats appreciate cat furniture with built-in covered boxes on the top.

Be aware of the energy level discrepancy between the two cats. Since Lulu is still a kitten she will want to play nonstop. Half-Pint might be willing to play to a limited extent, but being older, will probably prefer to sit by the window and enjoy the view of the neighborhood, rather than racing through the house. Make sure to have multiple play sessions every day with Lulu in order to focus some of the kitten energy away from Half-Pint.

You will also need to spend quality time with Half-Pint every day. She needs to be reassured that she is still the queen of the household.