

Cats Growl and Hiss at Each Other

CatChannel behavior expert Marilyn Krieger, CCBC, explains why a sudden unfamiliar scent can cause problems between two feline buddies.

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Q: I have two, 1-year-old tabbies named Bootsie and Tygre. They are sisters and have been together since birth. Tygre is the more playful of the two.

About a week ago, Bootsie slipped out the front door and was traumatized by a neighborhood feral cat. After Bootsie came in the house, Tygre took one smell of her and began to growl and hiss at her. Bootsie now growls and hisses at Tygre. We had Bootsie confined in a bathroom since the original incident, but we're starting to let them see each other under supervision. They still growl and hiss at each other a lot. It's tragic that our sweet little girls are fighting, and we can't enjoy or trust them together right now. Is there anything we can do to get them to be friends again?

A: Bootsie's unfortunate tangle with the neighbor cat resulted in her smelling differently than before the encounter. Poor Tygre didn't quite recognize her buddy's scent, so she responded with characteristic growls and hisses. Despite time passing, both cats are still conflicted around each other.

The good news is that you can help the two re-establish their lost friendship by encouraging positive and pleasant associations with each other. Start by confining one of the cats and doing a "pheromone exchange" twice a day. Pet each cat's cheek with a clean sock, then place the sock where the other one likes to hang out. Next step: Simultaneously feed both cats treats and their regular meals on each side of the closed door. If the cats are stressed because they are too close to each other, separate the feeding stations, then over a period of days, gradually inch them toward the closed door. Remember, the cats should still be separated from each other.

After the cats are fine with the pheromone exchange and are eating on each side of the closed door, encourage them to play underneath the door with each other. Use a double-ended toy, and slip it under the door so both cats can play with it.

After the cats are interacting with each other under the door and are responding well to the other activities, reintroduce them gradually to each other. Immediately before the face-to-face meetings, exchange smells. The goal is for each cat to smell like the other one. Gently pet Bootsie for an extended time with a soft, clean towel. The long, thorough petting will transfer her smells onto the towel. Then pet Tygre gently with another clean towel. Exchange towels, stroking Tygre with Bootsie's towel and Bootsie with Tygre's towel.

The first visits should be short and supervised. Start by feeding both cats at the same time, but at a distance from each other. The feeding stations should be moved far enough away that the two cats can hear and see each other enjoying their meals. After the meal, separate the cats again. Gradually extend the time that they are together. If there are any signs of aggression or nervousness, separate the two cats immediately and slow down the process.