

How to Create a Peaceful Multicat Household

CatChannel behavior expert Marilyn Krieger, CCBC, provides a plan for safely introducing two cats to each other

By Marilyn Krieger, CCBC

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Q: My 5-yr-old male cat is completely deaf. He was neutered and declawed before I got him, and he has spent his entire life indoors. He will not go outside, even if I'm outside and leave the door open.

My fiancé rescued her cat about a year and a half ago, after he had been abandoned. He is 6 years old, and is neutered and declawed. He stays indoors some days but much prefers to be outside, and he will not stay inside at night. Also, he is a very large cat.

My question is whether they will coexist: How should we introduce them, and what should we expect?

A: Start the introductions before the two cats meet nose-to-nose. Encourage positive associations between the cats by engaging them in relationship-building exercises. Since your cat is deaf, activities that focus on smell, taste and then play will be the most successful in building affinity between the cats.

Your cats need to be separated from each other by a closed door for a while. Depending on how the activities go, it might be one month or longer before they have their first real-life encounter. The introduction process is slow. In order to be successful, it needs to progress at a pace set by the cats.

Start by exchanging pheromones/scents. Cats have scent glands on their cheeks that produce pheromones. We call these friendly pheromones, and they come in handy when introducing cats to each other. First gently pet your cat's cheek with a clean sock or small towel. Pet your fiancé's cat's cheek with another clean sock. Exchange the socks, putting your cat's sock in the area where your fiancé's cat hangs out, and her cat's sock in your cat's area. The pheromone exchange should be done twice a day with clean socks for about one week, though the duration depends on the cats' reactions to the pheromone-laced socks. When both cats are accepting of the others' socks, add the next relationship-building activity to the agenda.

Food can help build relationships! Feed each cat delicious treats or their regular meals near each other while separated by the closed door. If the cats won't eat, then move the food away from the door and over a period of days, move the food closer to the closed door. When the cats are comfortably enjoying munching near each other, while separated by the closed door, add another activity.

The next mutually fun activity involves the cats playing with each other under the closed door. Slip a double-ended toy under the door, and encourage both cats to play with it simultaneously. The previous activities still need to be continued as well.

The first nose-to-nose introductions should be attempted only after both cats are comfortable with the other activities. Nose-to-nose introductions are done by opening the door about an inch and wedging your foot in such a way that the door can't be pushed open by either cat. The goal is to allow the cats to greet each other by touching noses.

After the cats are enjoying their nose greetings with no displays of aggression or nervousness, they are ready for the next step. Back their feeding stations a distance away from the door. The confined cat should still be fed inside the room while the other cat's feeding station is moved down the hall. They should be able to see each other but not be near each other while eating. Feed them delicious meals with the door open. After they've eaten, close the door. Every day, extend the time the door is open by about one second. At any sign of aggression, close the door and proceed slower.

The relationship should build from there. Make sure the visits are supervised and safe.*

Additionally, please keep both cats safe and healthy; don't allow them outside. Declawing takes a cat's natural defenses away, leaving it defenseless against other animals.

*Many of the introduction suggestions that I described above were developed by certified cat behavior consultant Pam



Johnson-Bennett.