

Should I Add a Kitten to the Household?

CatChannel behavior expert Marilyn Krieger, CCBC, offers timing suggestions for introducing an older cat to a new kitten.

By Marilyn Krieger

Posted: Nov. 28, 2008, 3 a.m. EST

Q: I have a 6-year-old female cat who I've had since she was born. I really love her and am very attached to her. My friend's cat just had a litter of kittens and he asked me if I would take one off his hands. I'm considering taking one of the males but they are only 2 weeks old. He said they will be ready in another three weeks to leave their mother. I don't know how my older cat is going to react to this. Also, I don't want any harm to come to the kitten. Is it a wise choice to put them together? I will be on vacation the first three weeks he's here.

A: Your friend should wait until the kittens are at least 12 weeks old before dividing the little family up. Five-week-old kittens are too young to separate from their siblings and mom. Between the ages of 7 and 14 weeks, kittens learn very important social skills as well as bite inhibition. During this important stage of development they also increase their physical coordination through play and other interactions with their mom and siblings.

Typically, older cats do not appreciate an unfamiliar kitten moving in. While most kittens want to spend every waking moment playing and chasing everything that moves, older cats prefer a nice nap or quiet afternoons looking out a window. Older cats can be very annoyed by the incessant playing of kittens, and kittens do not get the activity and play that they need when interacting with an older cat during this active growth stage.

Cats should always be introduced to each other gradually. I counsel my clients to take a month or longer to properly introduce cats to each other. Your female has lived all of her life with you and has never had to share either you or her house with any other cat. Bringing a new kitten home and introducing him too quickly would probably result in your resident cat being very unhappy and stressed. She also might injure the newcomer.

If you do decide to bring the new kitten home, wait until after you are back from your vacation to adopt him. Ideally, wait until the kitten is 12 weeks old. Introductions, even when done perfectly, are stressful for both the resident cat and the newcomer. Leaving them for three weeks during the critical introduction phase can result in your resident cat thinking she's been abandoned by her favorite human and result in a difficult introduction. Additionally, the new kitten needs to start bonding to you, his new primary owner when he arrives in your home.

When you do go on vacation, a cat-centric person should visit your resident cat at least once a day, giving her fresh food and water, cleaning her cat box and interacting with her.