

DOG-CAT INTRODUCTIONS

Try this approach before introducing your cat to a new dog or your dog to a new cat

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photo by Ashley Thibault

What your dog learns about living with a cat during the early stages of their initial introductions can set both your dog and cat up for a lifetime of friendship or a lifetime of problems. It's so important to help your dog and cat learn to live in harmony, if for no other reason than the possibility of a tragic ending. With that in mind, the best thing to do is to begin introducing your dog and the cat in a way that works for both of them.

THE FORMULA FOR SUCCESS

Having realistic expectations is the first step to successful introductions between your dog and cat. They are, after all, different species and, while

not "natural" friends, they can learn to tolerate each other and sometimes become very good companions. Plan on it taking anywhere from a couple of weeks to six months before your dog learns that the cat is off limits (and vice versa) unless you are supervising, all the while teaching your dog what she should do when she sees the cat (and vice versa).

First, don't allow your dog to chase the cat. Part of the problem with allowing your dog to chase the cat is that it is fun for the dog (chasing is very reinforcing), but your cat may turn around at some point and scratch or bite the dog, which could build up resentment that may turn into a revenge situation as their days together increase.

PREVENT CHASING BEHAVIORS

The first rule of changing a behavior (in this case, the dog chasing the cat) is preventing the behavior from starting or continuing. Your dog and your cat should have clearly defined areas, where they can be separated from one another so that the dog is unable to chase the cat, and so that your cat can feel safe from the dog. Baby gates, leashes and climbing trees are all great solutions, but I prefer baby gates so that there is a natural barrier that also allows the cat and the dog to see each other during training.



photo by Barbara Boragine Telesmanic

TRAINING YOUR DOG (AND CAT)

Teaching your dog to leave the cat alone will require some classical conditioning (Pavlov's dog effect) for both the dog and the cat. Start with taking a couple of small towels and rubbing each animal with

one towel to put their scents on them. Now, take the towel with the cat's scent and feed your dog really good treats on that towel throughout the day. Place the towel with your dog's scent under your cat's food bowl. This will start to establish good associations (food and treats) with each other's smell.

Next, you will be teaching your dog that when she sees the cat, even from a distance, she should come running to you because you have a wonderful reward for her. It's important that when you train this exercise you use very high-value rewards. Don't be stingy, as you really want your dog to think that coming to you is way better than messing with the cat. I would suggest small pieces (pea-sized) of cooked chicken, turkey or hamburger for this.



photo by Sonnet Scott

TEACH THE BEHAVIOR FIRST

It's important to teach the finished behavior and have it on a verbal cue before introducing the cat. The reason is so that your dog doesn't learn that her attention toward the cat is what makes you give her a reward; instead, that you have this cool word you say even when the cat is around that results in a reward. Pick a word such as "here" or "front" to teach your dog. Also, have your dog on a leash when you practice so when you do introduce the cat, you can prevent her from chasing the cat, and she is already familiar with having a leash on during this training.

SAY THE WORD

What you are going to be rewarding is that your dog looks at you after you have said your cue word. You will want to indicate that she chose the right answer by using a marker word or a clicker, and then giving the reward after she chooses the correct behavior. It should go something like this:

- Dog is on leash and you say your word, such as, "Here." (Be sure to smile!)
- You say nothing until she looks at you (don't repeat yourself—the goal is she responds the first time).
- You will then click or say something like, "Yep," the second she makes the correct decision to look at you.
- You will then give her a couple of rewards in a row—and be sure to make it really good treats, and praise her with a happy voice! (You could also play with a toy at this point to really make the behavior strong!)
- You will repeat this in many locations, including near the area where the cat is.

After she learns this response, you can start to teach her to move toward you but continue to train without the cat at this point. Say your cue word, and when she turns to look at you, you will again "mark" the correct behavior. This time, move away from your dog a few steps so that she has to follow you to get the reward. After doing this several times, increase the distance after each response, and sometimes add speed so that chasing you instead of the cat becomes a fun game. Again, you have not introduced the cat at this point.

Train for several days (several times a day for two to five minutes), so the response to your cue word becomes a very strong behavior, and your dog comes running toward you every time she hears it. Once you have that kind of response, you can add the cat to your training, but be sure to also use this when

the cat is not around so that your dog learns that you do this fun game all the time, not just when the cat is in the room. You don't want her to get the idea that harassing the cat will make you play this game.

THE INTRODUCTION

When you do introduce the cat, have your dog on a leash, or have the cat behind the baby gate in the early stages. You will also want to resist correcting your dog if she does respond to the cat, as this can build up a negative association with the cat. Reinforce the dog via all the attention she may perceive she gets when the cat is around. Allow your dog to see the cat, and then quickly say your cue word. Mark the correct behavior with the indicator word or a clicker, and move away so your dog has to follow to get the reward. It won't take long for your dog to catch on and learn to pay attention to you, rather than to the cat. This exercise will also teach your cat that the dog can be around but not bother with him or her.

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