

6 Steps to Introduce a New Cat To Your Dog

There are many ways you can introduce cats and dogs. These are the six steps I've used successfully many times, for a slow & safe introduction of a new cat to resident dogs. "Slow" can be as quickly as one week, or it can take months, depending on the pets being introduced. I worked in pet adoptions for over 12 years, speaking to hundreds of adopters in follow-up calls, as well as introducing many fostered and adopted cats to dogs in my own home. These six steps are the result of all those experiences – I've learned from mistakes made, so hopefully you won't have to! I've found the best "new cat to resident dogs" intro is using a crate, and going SLOW. Taking at least 1 week to do a slow, step-by-step introduction is really worth it, for everyone's safety and stress levels – including yours!

For the rest of this blog article, for simplicity's sake, I'll call your dog Rover, and your new cat Kitty.

You may wonder, why all these steps? Why not just put Rover in a crate or on a leash, and Kitty loose in the same room? That does sometimes work... BUT even "dog-friendly" cats can suddenly attack a dog they perceive as a threat, and a cat's paws and claws go right through most crate openings. I speak from experience: I have scars on my hands from grabbing a cat who'd latched on to the top of my dog's head! Cats can blind a dog with their claws, rip dogs ears to shreds with their teeth, and a cat bite is a nasty puncture wound that often gets infected. And of course, many dogs can kill a cat with one shake. A good big crate isn't cheap, but neither is a trip to the vet! To avoid all those risks, I recommend these six steps for a safe cat-to-dog introduction.

You can use this introduction technique for a resident-cat to new-dog introduction, just skip Kitty's "isolation and adjustment" part of Step 1, while keeping her completely separated from Rover while you get him ready, and follow the rest!

1. Get ready

Getting Rover and Kitty ready can take some time, depending on their prior training and personalities. To get Rover ready, if he does not already know the commands "sit" and "stay", he should learn them before being introduced to Kitty for the first time. To get Kitty ready, she will need an isolation room, with her food, water, litterbox and bed. Give her a chance to become adjusted to her new home – depending on her personality, this can be anywhere from 1 day to several weeks. You can spend time with her in the iso room, but Rover should stay outside... no peeking!

2. Opposite sides of the door

Feed Rover and Kitty on opposite sides of a closed solid door (not glass, screen, or see-through) for 1 week. They will begin to associate each others' presence (smell, sounds) with a pleasurable experience – eating! If Rover starts whining/pawing/barking at the door, correct him with a stern but calm "No!" and move the food bowls farther away, keep him on a leash, and gradually move his bowl closer to the cat's door each

feeding time. Eventually when they are eating calmly next to the door, expose them to each others' scent more strongly by rubbing them with a towel or rag, and placing it down with the food bowl, for them to smell as they eat.

3. Get Kitty used to crate

You want Kitty to get used to spending short periods of time in a big wire crate (ideal) or molded plastic airline pet carrier – at least large enough for her to stand up and turn around, bigger is better. Lock Rover away, and lure Kitty into the crate with a cat treat or a tiny bit of canned food, and shut the crate door for 5 minutes, then let her out. If Kitty is nervous in the crate, practice this a 2-3 times a day until she is relaxed. If she won't go in the crate, try making a trail of treats/food into the crate... or you may have to pick her up and put her in the crate. Rover should be totally separated as far away as possible, in another room for example, or out on a walk. Since in Step 4 I like to use my biggest indoor room, which isn't my Kitty isolation room, I practice closing Rover away, carrying Kitty into the crate room, luring her into the crate, hanging out for 5 minutes, then carrying her back into her isolation room.

4. Dog on leash, cat in crate

I find this step easiest to do this step after Rover's daily exercise, so 3 times a day, for 5 minutes.

Put Rover away. Put Kitty in the crate. This step is to have them see each other with NO physical contact. Put a leash on Rover and bring him into the crate room. Command him to either "sit" or "down" and "stay" as soon as he enters, just where he can see Kitty. Have him practice his sit, down, shake, etc. for 5 minutes in that location. If he ignores your command because he's too interested in the cat, or barks, growls, or lunges, use your firm "no" and walk him out of the room. Get his attention outside again by practicing a few commands, then try entering the room again. Remember to breathe and think calm thoughts, and try to keep some slack in the leash. The "worst" that will happen is Rover or Kitty will lunge at each other, and you will have time pull Rover back – everyone is safe! Pets respond to tension they feel in you. It often helps to say things out-loud in a pleasant tone, like, "Kitty, this is your big brother Rover."

Repeat this step for as many days as you need to, until both Kitty and Rover can be in the same room without tension, fear, aggression, vocalizing, or any other undesired behavior. This can be the first time, or it can take weeks, or months – and rarely, never. There are some high prey-drive dogs or territorial cats that that cannot live freely and safely together. If you've spent a week or more with trying at least 3 sessions a day, and they are still acting aggressively towards each other *or tense staring* with no improvement, please consult with a professional behaviorist/trainer. *Staring is often a warning an animal is about to attack. Please be very careful if your dog or cat seems "calm" but is actually tense, stiff, and staring.*

With each 5 minute training session, allow them to get a little closer together, with Rover still on leash and Kitty still in the crate. Then leave with lots of praise for everyone being

so good! If Kitty becomes frightened, or Rover starts ignoring you, increase the distance between the animals and progress more slowly. Eventually, the animals should be brought close enough together to allow them to investigate each other visually and calmly. Then you can allow Rover to sniff at the kennel and Kitty, as long as he is being calm, and listens to you if you say “sit” or “come.”

Now increase the length of the sessions together. If Rover or Kitty is agitated in any way, you may have to spend as many days as necessary with the cat in the crate, dog on leash, until they are calm and relaxed. You may find distracting yourself (a book, a DVD) will relax you, and that will help them relax too!

Once they’ve sniffed each other through the crate with no issues, and you can spend a half-hour in the room with everyone relaxed right next to each other, you are ready for Step 5.

5. Dog leashed, cat loose

With Rover on leash in a down-stay at the far side of the room, have a helper open the door of the crate. Keep Rover focused on you with training commands and treats. If Kitty stays in the crate, tempt her out by tossing a treat just outside the crate door. If she won’t come out, leave the room with Rover, wait for Kitty walk out of the crate, and come back in with River. Kitty may run and hide – just focus on keeping Rover in his down stay. If he reacts to the cat walking or running, you’ll need to do the 3 daily sessions like in Step 4, until he’s once again ignoring the cat while she is loose. NEVER allow Rover to “play” by chasing Kitty, ever. This is a game that can turn deadly in an instant.

I recommend keeping Rover on leash (when not locked away separately) for the next 2 weeks, gradually increasing the amount of time they are spending together until....

6. Both loose together!

It’s been 2 weeks with Rover hanging out and seeing Kitty run, jump, play and they’re now always acting relaxed, mostly ignoring each other. You can unhook his leash – congratulations, you’ve successfully introduced your new cat to your dog! I still recommend **when you are not home: keep them separated with a physical barrier** (crate, door, etc) to be certain they will be safe, for at least an additional 1 month. With bigger or high prey-drive dog breeds, you may *always* want to keep them safely separated when you are not home.

I hope these steps help lead you to a harmonious multi-pet household!

Additional tips: Although your dog must be taught that chasing or being rough with the cat is unacceptable behavior, your dog must also be taught how to behave appropriately, and be rewarded for doing so (e.g. sitting, coming when called, or lying down in return for a tidbit.) If your dog is always punished whenever the cat is around, and never has “good things” happen in the cat’s presence, your dog may redirect aggression toward the cat.

Precautions: Dogs like to eat cat food – keep the cat food high enough to be out of the dog’s reach. And although there are no health hazards to a dog eating cat feces, it is usually distasteful to owners – and so tempting to dogs its hard to train them not to – could you leave your dog alone with a cheeseburger at nose level? The best solution I know of is to place the litterbox where the dog cannot access it, but the cat can easily – such as behind a baby gate, or in a closet or cabinet with a cat door cutout, or the door wedged open (from both sides) just wide enough for the cat.