

Cat-Cat Introductions

Introducing cats to one another can be a tricky process. Some cats are immediately accepting of new feline friends, while others can take months to acclimate. However, there are steps that you can take to make the transition process go as smoothly as possible.

Part 1: Confinement and acclimation.

When introducing a new cat to your household, you want to give them time to adjust to *one change at a time*. This means confining your new cat in a “sanctuary space” with everything they need (ex. food / water / litterbox / bedding / toys / hiding spot). That way your new cat will be able to get comfortable in their new space before meeting an unfamiliar cat, and your resident cat will have time to safely explore their new unfamiliar scents and sounds without disturbing them.

1. **Keep your cats separated in their own spaces** during the beginning stages of your introduction. This means behind a closed door. For some cats this can be as little as a week, or as long as a few months. All cats are individuals and acclimate on different timeframes.
2. **Offer enrichment from behind a closed door.** While the two cats are confined in separate areas, offer a small toy like a piece of string (if safe), feathers, or strips of paper that can be moved back and forth between the rooms. Try to find something that will pique their curiosity! The idea is to offer a toy that you can leave out for both cats can bat around, making the opposite side move without actually seeing the other cat. This is especially helpful for cats who are play motivated.
3. **Scent swap items.** Rub fabric items like clean socks or hand towels on the cheeks/chin scent glands of each cat, then place them in the opposite cat’s area. For cats who don’t want to rub their faces on items, you can leave the item in a cat’s preferred bedding area to collect their scent before swapping them.
4. **If possible, trim both cats’ nails.** This is a good precaution once they begin having access to one another, especially if there is a size disparity.
5. **Gauge your cats’ readiness for the next step.** Are they curious about the door? Do they approach and/or spend time nearby, do they play near the door, are they trying to follow you through? Make sure your kitties are feeling confident in their own spaces before taking the next steps. Always proceed at the pace of the less confident cat. One might be ready before the other!

Part 2: First introductions

For safety reasons, we recommend introductions be structured, supervised, and begin from behind a barrier. This way the cats have the time and distance they need to feel comfortable approaching an unfamiliar cat.

1. **Begin structured introduction sessions using a barrier they can see through, like an exercise pen or baby gate.** Start these sessions after *at least* a week has gone by with your new cat in their sanctuary space, longer if the resident cat is still feeling uncomfortable. 2 weeks is the average. These sessions can start off short, 3-4min at a time. Gather your tools (high value items like toys or treats), open the door, and make sure the barrier is solidly in place. Ideally it is a two-person job (with one on each side of the barrier), but can also be done with one. The idea is to engage both cats on opposite sides of the baby gate with something they LOVE. This can be petting, treats, meals, toys, etc. Once you are done, the door closes again.
 - a. Make sure that whatever reinforcer they are getting is special, and that they only have access to them when the other cat is around (a favorite treat, exciting toy, etc.).
 - b. Offer the special items *at a distance that is comfortable* to both cats! If one cat will only engage with the food or toys at 10ft away, start there.
 - c. Distract the more confident cat. Often the less confident cat will be more likely to investigate if the other cat’s attention is elsewhere.
 - d. Note: Most cats can easily jump over a baby gate or exercise pen. This is why we recommend distracting the cats with high value items, and to never leave the barrier unattended.



2. **Begin feeding meals “together” on opposite sides of gate** once the two cats have had several days of uneventful introduction sessions. This includes the whole exciting “food ritual”—open the can near the gate, spoon the food into the bowl near the gate, etc.
 - a. Don’t put the bowls *too* close together, especially at first. Ex. if the cats ARE comfortable right up at the gate, feed them at opposite corners.
 - b. Make sure there is no opportunity for one cat to try and steal the other cat’s food. We don’t want them to feel they have to guard from one another.
 - c. The idea behind these sessions is for both cats to build positive associations with being around one another. If they only get their favorite things when they’re together, being around each other becomes something to look forward to!
3. **Track your progress!** *Time is your ally* for introducing cats to one another, but the process can feel slow. Keeping track of your milestones is a great way to stay engaged and celebrate your successes. It also gives you a clear picture if and when you hit any speedbumps, and how to fix them. *Many cats can take several months to really acclimate with one another.*

Part 3: Sharing space

1. **Slowly begin increasing your new cat’s access to the rest of the living space, starting under supervision.** Exercise pens can be VERY useful here to block off parts of rooms at a time. During these first forays:
 - a. Make sure your resident cat has “safe zones” where your new cat can’t follow, whether this is vertical space (on top of high places), up a flight of stairs, or into an area the new cat can’t access.
 - b. Try and distract the more confident of the cats with toys or treats. Same principles as at the gate—the less confident cat will feel better about approaching (or simply not running away) if the other cat isn’t paying attention to them.
 - c. Keep these sessions short at first, and gradually increase the amount of time. Try and end them on a good note.
 - d. If both cats are interested in play, try having 2 toys available. You can even play two separate games on opposite sides of furniture (improvised visual barriers!).
 - e. If the new cat is the less confident cat, make sure
2. **Don’t get hands on if things don’t go according to plan.** Cats in a stare down (or a scuffle) won’t differentiate between friendly contact and threatening contact. Often trying to pick up even a friendly cat in a tense moment can result in redirected aggression. If a tense situation occurs:
 - a. Try to get the cats’ attention away from one another with toys or food.
 - b. Try placing a visual barrier between them (such as a blanket or towel).
 - c. Try offering a means of escape for the less confident cat.
3. **Gradually increase length of supervised visits.** Once the cats are becoming more comfortable with short visits, gradually begin increasing the time they spend together. You can incorporate enrichment like play, puzzle feeders and heated beds to build positive associations with these sessions.
4. **Almost there!** The next step is to allow the cats to be out together at all times *except* when unable to be supervised (such as when you go to bed, to work, the supermarket, etc.). Pay attention to your cats’ body language! Are you still having to manage their interactions closely to stop one from bugging the other? It’s probably not time to leave them alone. Are they comfortably settling down within sight of one another, or even in separate rooms? Leaving them alone might be successful!
5. **Even after they’re comfortable, watch for signs that a cat might need breaks.** This is OK! Transition is a process, and it’s never a bad idea to take it back a step for the good of your cat’s relationship. Even if the cats have been doing great, cats are sensitive to their environments, particularly during transitions. A loud night of fireworks or the disruption of a dinner party can escalate tensions between cats. If you can predict disruptions like this, try to separate your cats during that time.
6. **Important: when introducing cats, take punishment out of your vocabulary.** Transitions are a time of stress—because of this, punishment is counter-productive and can often make behavior worse. Instead, use the tips above to manage scuffles, and work as much as possible to set the cats up for success so they have the least amount of opportunities possible to display those unwanted behaviors.

BODY LANGUAGE

Red flags (indicative of potential aggression, go back a few steps):

- Growling while moving forward
- Growling with prolonged hard stares
- Yowling or spitting when approached (often indicates being cornered)
- Closing distance to swat
- Stalking behavior (not obviously play motivated)
- Hyper fixation, unable to have attention redirected away from other cat even at a distance
- “Huffing”/ “sucking air” sound with flared nostrils

Yellow flags (uncomfortable, but getting there):

- Slinking around with low body carriage
- Larger than normal pupils for light level
- Moving from hiding spot to hiding spot
- Hissing when approached/retreating when approached (this is actually entirely appropriate communication asking for distance)
- Tail twitching or lashing

Green flags (starting to feel comfortable):

- Not paying attention to the other cat while in the same space
- Yawning, stretching, blinking, “soft” eyes (half closed)
- Shaking their head as if wet
- Flopping over on side with *relaxed* posture (*tense* lying down on side posture can indicate defensiveness)
- Ears perked forward
- Pupils normal for light level
- Approaching the other cat then immediately moving away again (this is GREAT!)
- Sniffing the other cat
- Flopping upside down (sometimes accompanied by stretching)
- Playing with toys in the same space as the other cat
- Eating treats in the same space as the other cat