

4 KEYS TO A MULTI-CAT HOUSEHOLD

The more the merrier?

The stats show that most people with cats usually have more than one. If you fall into this category, you'll know how important it is to create and maintain harmony among your feline friends. There's nothing worse than having to manage cats that can't get along, and being constantly on the alert for hissing matches that can flare into fights.

Whether you want to prevent this from happening to you — or if it already has and you need some guidance — the following keys will help you unlock your cats' potential to get along.

1 . Know where your cats come from: While the domestic cat's wild ancestor is classified as solitary (able to raise young without the benefit of a group), house cats have more flexible social systems. Four thousand years of domestication have favored cats that are tolerant and even friendly with each other. Think of feral felines, which sometimes live in groups of dozens or even hundreds. In these colonies, related individuals are more likely to be friendly with one another than those that aren't related. That means there is something to be said for adopting two kittens or longtime housemates rather than attempting to introduce a new cat later on.

How a cat will adapt to a newcomer depends on the ages, personalities and prior experiences of both animals, so it's a good idea to find out as much as you can about any cat you are adopting. Where did she come from and what is her background? How old is she, and how does she react to the other cats in the shelter or rescue? Does she seem outgoing and friendly, or fearful and defensive?

2 . Recognize that most cats are socially awkward: Even though cats can often live happily together, they don't have the complex social relationships that dogs, horses or chimpanzees do. For example, they don't usually co-operate with one another; related feral females are known to help each other raise kittens, but have you ever seen a pack of cats attack a rabbit? This lack of co-operation means that when things go bad between two cats, they don't have good ways to make up.

Misunderstandings are also common in cats. Dogs display the easily recognized "play bow", but cats do not have ritualized play behaviors. A cat may chase or swat at another in play, but the other cat might take it as an intentional threat, which means the play can quickly escalate into aggression.

With this in mind, you can see the importance of supervising, monitoring, and even limiting interactions between cats to give them time to become familiar with and trust each other.

3 . Micro-manage introductions First impressions are very important to cats. Initial introductions that are stressful and unpleasant, and cause the cats to become fearful or aggressive, may cause long term conflicts. Introductions must be micro-managed so both cats are relaxed and friendly rather than threatening or aggressive.

HINT: Some cats may require only several days to adjust to one another. Most will require weeks, others months, while a few may never make the transition.

Do not let a new cat loose in your home to work out his relationship with the resident cat on his own. This is truly a recipe for disaster. Even if the two cats ultimately work things out, the stress it places on them is unwarranted and not worth the risk.

Follow these steps, and if you get stuck at any one, seek professional help from a behavior expert who really knows cats.

1. Put your new cat in a room separate from your resident cat so they can't see each other except when you are working with them. Prevent them from seeing or touching one another until they are perfectly comfortable with each other's odors and sounds on either side of the closed door.
2. Place blankets or towels with the scent of each cat under the food dish or in the bed of the other, so the odors become familiar.
3. Allow your new cat some free time to wander about the house while you confine your existing cat. This helps the resident cat gradually learn to tolerate an interloper into her territory, while your new cat has a chance to get familiar with his new "digs" without being threatened.
4. Set up brief, positive encounters between the cats. Do this by giving them tasty treats or gentle massage when they're in each other's presence. Control the movements of both cats by having them in carriers, on harnesses and leashes attached to immovable objects, or on either side of a partially open door with you in between.
5. Go slowly. End the encounters before either cat becomes uncomfortable, fearful or aggressive. Gradually allow the cats more freedom together, and relax your supervision as the encounters continue to go well.

HINT: Cats also use vertical space to create social distance, so be sure to provide a variety of comfortable and easily accessible high perches.

4. Arrange your home to minimize conflicts Your cats may prefer to keep their distance from one another, especially in the early stages of their relationship. Support this by setting up multiple "resource stations" throughout the house. Food, water bowls, litter boxes, beds, toys and other necessities should be positioned in several locations that can't be easily guarded, so your cats can comfortably get what they need while having a good chance of avoiding one another.

What if none of this works? We haven't yet unlocked all the mysteries behind why some cats get along and others don't. That means there's no single "turn-key" program that will guarantee your cats will like

each other. You must be prepared for the possibility that, despite your best efforts, your cats may only tolerate one other, or in rare cases, simply can't co-exist peaceably. If this happens, it's much kinder to rehome one of the cats than continue to allow them to live under constant stress.

In most cases, however, working with these four keys will help you create a happy and agreeable feline family.

Bridging the age gap: Never let a kitten harass, torment or frighten an older cat. Distract the kitten when he starts this behavior. Provide him with plenty of toys, and schedule some interactive play time with him. Use the toys, not your hands or feet, to play with him. The more time and energy the kitten spends playing with you or his toys, the less he'll have to harass your other cat.

If the kitten cannot be distracted from bothering the older cat, isolate him in a room for several minutes. Be quick and consistent when giving him this "time-out."

Double trouble : Redirected aggression can be a real threat to feline harmony in your home. If your cats get upset when they see outdoor felines through the window, they may "take it out" on each other. Humanely shoo the other cats away from your property, ask your neighbors to keep their animals at home, keep your own cats indoors, and if need be, close windows, blinds and drapes so your cats can't interact with the outdoor intruders.

If you already have two or more cats in your home, the introduction of another can also trigger redirected aggression among the resident group.

Do not allow social conflicts to continue without intervening. Whether it's a young cat harassing an older one, or one cat being territorial or just afraid of the other, separate them if necessary to prevent more fighting, and repeat the introduction procedures.

Be on the lookout for signs that your cats don't care for one another. The sooner you can intervene, before avoidance and anxiousness erupt into fighting, the better chance you'll have of creating friendly felines. If the relationship doesn't improve, seek professional help from your veterinarian or an experienced behavior consultant.

Signs of feline friction: Growling, hissing or swatting that obviously isn't play. One cat gets up and moves away when the other approaches, runs from the other, or is under or on top of something when the other cat is around and active. One cat spends most of his time hiding or is always looking over his shoulder to see where the other one is.

For more information, see the Helping Kitties Co-Exist DVD available at www.HelpingKitty.com.

Remember: Take it slow...to make it work...
talk to your vet for more suggestions.



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