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Bringing Home Your New Cat

Congratulations on adopting a cat! Sharing your home with a rescue kitty can bring many years of enjoyment and companionship. The first few hours (and days) after bringing your cat home can affect how well s/he settles in. It's important to remember is that your new cat is dealing with a lot of change when being introduced to your home – new people, new routine, possibly new animals, and, perhaps most importantly, new territory. First and foremost be prepared to be patient and to not rush things. The guidelines below are designed to try to ensure that the introduction to your home goes as smoothly as possible.

Step One – Preparing a Secure Room for Your New Cat

Keep your cat in a separate room to begin with so that s/he can start to feel safe and get used to the new surroundings. Choose a small, secure room for your new cat, even if it is a bathroom. S/he will feel safer in a small room rather than in a large one. If you provide a big room to start with s/he will probably squeeze himself into a small space anyway. The room should not have a door that leads directly outside the house.

Cat-proof the room:

- Remove breakables
- Remove or lock away medications, cleaning materials, and other chemicals
- Ensure that the windows are locked or securely screened¹
- Remove items such as hair ties, dental floss, or rubber bands that can be possible choking hazards
- Keep the toilet seat down
- Keep cords to blinds out of reach (these can strangle cats)
- Hide or bundle electrical cords that kittens might be tempted to chew
- Remove plants that are poisonous to cats (check online at www.humanesociety.org for a list of common house plants that are a danger to cats)

If there is space in the room, provide a high area where the cat can climb onto to rest and observe. Cats feel more relaxed if they can look out from a height, so make use of shelves or other spots that can give the cat a higher perch (not too high if your new cat is a kitten!).

¹The San Francisco SPCA says “No matter what you might have heard about cats falling from windows and surviving, that doesn’t happen often. Most do not survive or are very badly injured. Making certain that a cat or kitten cannot insert a paw into the window and push it open, and making certain that you have tight fitting screens in any open window (even if only open an inch!) is very important. Cats should never have access to an open, unprotected window.”

Step Two – Gather Supplies

Provide a suitable place for the cat to sleep, or even better, provide a choice: a cozy cat bed or igloo, cat blankets and cushions inside cardboard boxes with high sides (the boxes can be placed upright, on their sides, or upside down with a hole cut in the side so that he can hide). Place the bed(s) against walls or in corners, rather than in the middle of the room, because that will make her or him feel safer. Wash any bedding if it has been previously used by other animals, so that it doesn't smell of another cat.

Water bowls and food dishes should be ceramic or stainless steel, rather than plastic, which can harbor bacteria. Ideally, put food on one side of a cat bed and water on the other, as cats don't like to drink from bowls right next to where they eat. Fresh water should always be available.

Provide a litter box as far away as possible from the food and water and bedding. Make sure the box has been scrubbed clean if it has been used before or buy a new box. Provide a few toys and a scratching post.

Step Three – Introducing Your Cat to Your Home

When you arrive home, bring the cat to the room that you have already set up. Leave the cat alone to explore the area. Return to the room after an hour or so. If s/he chooses to hide, just sit with her or him quietly and talk gently. Don't try to force him to come out. If s/he is a little more confident, get down to the cat's level, hold out your hand, and call to him. Let your cat come to you.

Give your cat plenty of time to adjust to his new home and visit him often so he can get used to your presence. As long as he is eating, drinking, and using the litter box, there is no need to worry. If the cat is very timid, s/he may not want to come out to eat. In this case, try moving the food closer to the cat's hiding place, then leave him or her alone. A radio with calm music might help.

Children are often very excited about a new animal in the home. However, in the early stages, keep the meetings between children and the new cat short and explain to children that they should be quiet and gentle while the cat is getting used to the new home.

You can try offering a treat or using a toy to tempt your new cat from a hiding place. Play is a good bonding tool because it is less intimidating than physical contact, it relieves stress, and provides an outlet for pent-up energy. You might find it easier to encourage play in the early morning and at dusk, when cats are naturally more active.

Step Four – Introducing Your New Cat to Other Animals in the Home

INTRODUCING CATS

The most important part of introducing a new cat to other cats in the household is not to rush the process. *Take it slowly.* Introducing cats to each other too quickly could cause a lasting bad impression that can be very difficult to overcome. Many people assume that if their current cat has lived with another cat in the past, then everything will be fine when a new cat is introduced. However, this is not necessarily the case and it's best to give the current cat time to adjust to the change.

Cats are naturally territorial and it will be stressful for the newcomer to find himself in a strange environment with all new smells. It is equally stressful for your first cat to have the newcomer "invading" her home. Be sure to spend time with both cats, so that they are each getting attention.

Here are some introduction tips from the Humane Society of the United States:

- Feed your resident pets and the newcomer on each side of the door to this room, so that they associate something enjoyable (eating!) with each other's smells. Don't put the food so close to the door that the animals are too upset by each other's presence to eat.
- Gradually move the dishes closer to the door until both cats can eat calmly while standing directly on either side of the door.
- Try to get your pets to interact with a toy. Tie a toy to each end of a string, then place it so there's a toy on either side of the door. Hopefully, they'll start batting the toys around and maybe even batting paws.
- Swap the blankets or beds the cats use or gently rub a washcloth on one cat's cheeks and put it underneath the food dish of another. If there are more than two animals in the house, do the same for each animal.
- Once your new cat is using her litter box and eating regularly while confined, let her have free time in the house while confining your other animals to the new cat's room. It's best to introduce your new cat to a room or two at a time and increase her access to other rooms over a few days. This allows the newcomer to get familiar with her new surroundings without the other animals frightening her.
- Use two doorstops to prop open the dividing door just enough to allow the animals to see each other.
- The first time the cats come face-to-face, they may sit and stare at each other. You can provide distraction by dangling toys in front of them at the same time. This may encourage them to play together.
- They might sniff each other, hiss, and walk away. That's to be expected. This may go on for a few days or so, and then you'll probably find them both sleeping on your bed.
- As soon as there are signs of increasing aggression (flattened ears, growling, spitting, crouching) make a loud noise by clapping your hands or throw a pillow nearby to distract them. If the standoff continues, very carefully herd them into separate parts of the house to calm down. Don't try to pick up a cat when he is agitated or upset.

The ASPCA recommends, "If you're bringing a new cat into a household with multiple cats, introduce each resident cat to the newcomer individually. After each of your cats has met the new cat one-on-one, you can start to allow all of the cats to mingle as a group."

Remember to be patient. Some cats will take to each other easily and others will need more time to adapt. It can take a few weeks, a few months, or even longer for cats to fully adjust to and build a relationship with their fellow housemates. Even resident cats who don't put out the welcome mat for new cats at first can, over time, learn to get along and even enjoy the presence of a new companion.

INTRODUCING YOUR CAT TO A DOG IN THE HOUSEHOLD (excerpted from the San Francisco SPCA)

Introducing a new cat to a resident dog is similar to introducing cats to one another. Without letting them actually meet, you will want to start by giving the new cat a safe haven. Set the cat up in a separate room and allow him or her to become comfortable. Once s/he is comfortable in the room, let the cat explore the rest of the house for short periods each day while the dog is not there.

When the cat appears fairly relaxed in most areas of the house, let them meet. The best way to do this is to introduce them while the cat is up on a high surface unreachable by the dog (such as a counter or cat furniture), then bring the dog into the room on leash. Observe their interactions. *A dog that is showing overt aggression such as lunging, snarling, growling, baring teeth, etc., will probably never accept a cat.* If all is reasonably calm so far, walk the dog around the room on leash. Let the dog go wherever he wants, but don't

let go of the leash in case the dog decides to chase the cat. On-leash interactions give the cat the opportunity to approach the dog if s/he chooses, or to find routes of escape. During the first few meetings the cat and dog will probably not interact face to face. Do not ever let the dog intimidate the cat by barking or chasing. On the other hand, if the cat bops the dog on the nose as a warning, that is a good sign and should not be discouraged. When they set up boundaries between themselves, they are beginning to establish a working relationship. Let the cat interact with the dog on leash for about half an hour, then return the cat back to his safe haven. Increase the amount of time they are together a little bit each visit.

It is important to be patient and encouraging during their interactions. If you are relaxed, they will be more at ease. Always praise friendly behavior profusely. Don't try to rush the introduction or force them to interact more than they are willing. Pressing them to accept each other will only slow down the adjustment process. You should use your best judgment as to when they can begin supervised sessions with the dog off-leash.

Step Five – Ongoing Care of Your Cat

- Provide fresh water 24/7. Do not feed milk as a substitute for water; milk is not easily digestible by cats and can lead to vomiting or diarrhea.
- Feed high quality food. Hope Vet has a pamphlet on recommended pet food suppliers that may be helpful in selecting a food. There are different opinions about wet vs. dry food. Wet food tends to be lower in calories and has a higher moisture content, which is important for cats. Dry food can be useful when you want to provide opportunities for your cat to “graze,” but in general its best if dry food does not constitute 100% of a cat's diet.
- Clean out the litter box at least once a day, preferably at least twice. If there is more than one cat in the home, it's good to have one box for each of them.
- If your cat was not already spayed or neutered, make plans to get that done. Remember that females come into heat and can become pregnant by the time they are 5 months old. Male kittens mature a little later, but failure to get them neutered can lead to unwanted behavior.
- Make time for play! Indoor cats need exercise to keep them fit and entertained. Even simple play things such as balls of aluminum foil or paper bags (with the handles cut off) can be great fun for your cats. Rotate toys to keep your cat's interest.
- If your cat is already microchipped, be sure to update the registration with your contact information.
- Plan for yearly visits with a veterinarian. Vet exams can identify health issues that might otherwise go unnoticed (cats are very good at hiding pain).
- Consider purchasing pet insurance. There are more options for insurance than there used to be and it may be worthwhile in the long term.

Another tip from the Humane Society:

“Groom your cat often. All cats, whether long- or short-haired, should be brushed regularly to keep their coats and skin healthy, prevent matting, and reduce shedding and hairballs. They also need to have their claws clipped to keep them from growing into their paw. Grooming is a good opportunity to discover any lumps, fleas, injuries, etc., and bond with your kitty.”

Special Notes on Kitten Care

Before bringing home a kitten, take a careful look around your space to see what might be unsafe for a kitten. In addition to the cat-proofing suggestions in Step One, “make sure there are no tiny places where a kitten could run if frightened, and hide, and then be difficult to find. Plan to block access to those kinds of spaces, especially behind stoves, refrigerators, etc. Recliner chairs, motors, washers and dryers are very dangerous places that kittens may try to hide in, too” (from the San Francisco SPCA).

Just like human babies, kittens are growing at a rapid rate and they need good nutrition to support their development. They need to eat more frequently than adult cats and it is best to provide food that is specifically formulated for kittens. Kitten food provides extra protein to meet their high energy needs.

Veterinarians recommend that clumping litter not be used for kittens because it can be dangerous if they ingest too much of the litter while grooming.

Infinite Hope has a policy to adopt kittens out in pairs or to homes where there is already another cat. This is because kittens need the company of another cat as part of their socialization. It is important that kittens also get socialization from people – through playtime, handling, and affection. Playtime provides essential learning and development for kittens, so plan to have play sessions of at least 15-20 minutes several times a day.

For more information, visit:

The Humane Society of the United States: www.humanesociety.org

The ASPCA: www.aspca.org (and www.aspcabehavior.org)

The San Francisco SPCA: <http://www.sfspca.org/resources/library/for-cat-owners>