

A PROTOCOL FOR INTRODUCING A NEW PET TO OTHER PETS

KAREN OVERALL, VETERINARIAN AND BEHAVIORIST

This handout has a tick sheet at the end that summarizes the main points. If you are an experienced pet person, you may not need to read the entire handout in detail if the tick sheet makes sense to you. If you have questions, the answers are likely in the handout!

Adjustment and Transition

When you first bring home a new pet, expect a period of transition and adjustment for the other pets in the household. You may find that some of your pets hide from the new addition, while others might try to push him around. Sometimes, the original pets will start to do behaviors designed to get your attention, including barking, pawing, stealing items or pushing the new addition out of the way and jumping all over you. Cats may mark with urine, stool or their claws. All these behaviors can be normal and are not worrisome if they change within a week or two. If you have a younger animal, or one approximately 2 -3 years of age who is developing social maturity (an understanding of where he fits in the basic hierarchy of the home), you may find that he “regresses” a bit and reverts to younger behaviors for a short while. He will recover and catch up quickly.

If the animals in the home do not revert to normal behaviors within a short time, or if they become aggressive to you or each other, you have a problem that will not go away on its own. Short, temporary changes in appetite may be normal; not eating or only eating at odd hours or in certain circumstances is not normal. The sooner you seek help from your veterinarian, the better off you will be!

Gradual Introductions

You can make the transition easier for new pets by using gradual introductions. This means that, unless it is “love at first sight”, the new pet should be kept separate from the other pets whenever they are not closely supervised. This advice may be a bit extreme, but it is designed to ensure both that no injuries occur and that the social system of the original pets isn’t suddenly fragmented. The original pet or pets should have access to the same areas of the house as previously. If the original dog was crated, the crate can still be used. If access was restricted to the first floor, this pattern should continue to be followed.

The new pet should be placed in a neutral area (neutral here means not a “high value” room for the family like a master bedroom, kid’s room, or family room/lounge, around food dishes, window sills that are favorite perching sites) with toys, a blanket, water, a litterbox if the new pet is a cat, and anything else she might need. If you restrict the new pet to a highly valued and preferred area and exclude other pets from it, you may be provoking anxieties rather than creating a positive experience. This can be hard – everyone wants to snuggle with the cute newbie, but it’s not forever!

Introduce the new pet gradually. First, spend some time alone with the new pet. Then bring the new pet out on a leash or harness and let the other pets explore her. This works even for cats:

<https://store.petsafe.net/come-with-me-kitty-harness-and-bungee-leash>

If you anticipate problems, the other animals can be on leashes or harnesses too. If you have too many animals to adequately monitor under these circumstances, the new pet can be placed in a crate or exercise pen or playpen in the center of a room and the other pets can one by one investigate the crated newcomer. *Please note that you can only place a dog or cat in a cage or crate if she is comfortable in it. If you see any signs of panic or freezing behavior, do not use the enclosure.* If one of the original pets is hostile initially, remove the new pet and place her in an area where she can recover and not feel threatened. Animals newly introduced to other animals in a household need to have regular quiet, secure time.

If you have a dog that is always crated, to can accustom him quickly to a new dog by crating the new dog at a distance where she can be seen by the original dog but where they cannot directly interact through the crates. As the dogs become more accustomed to each other, their crates can be moved gradually closer together until they are side by side.

“Pet-Proofing” Your Home

Be aware that the area in which you are confining your new pet should be “pet proof”. This means toilet seats should be down, electric cords should be up and put away, sockets should be protected w/child-guards and any valuable or fragile items should be moved. New pets will explore, and that exploration should not put them or your desired objects in danger! If your new pet is a very young puppy or kitten you may wish to crate him for his own protection. We have additional handouts about crate training!

What About “Recycled” Pets?

Many newly adopted pets are “recycled” pets who are being rehomed. You may have some knowledge of their reason for being rehomed, but it is unlikely that you know all the triggers that will cause such dogs or cats distress. If you try to separate the new pet by placing him in a crate or a separate room and he becomes more distressed, please consider using leads, harnesses and baby gates, rather than true separations, to control interactions. One of the common problems with recycled pets is panic that is associated with confinement. They won’t “get used to it” – repeated isolations will make their anxiety worse.

Where Might There Be Problems?

Whenever any animal is isolated for any reason, it’s is very important that she still receive a lot of social attention. Separate does not mean “deprived”! This is especially true for new pets. When you come home, greet the original pets (asking them to sit and look at you first!), and let them out, or follow whatever your normal initial routine is. Then go on to attend to the new pet. Do not rush – when people are stressed and rushed their emotional state may be passed the pets and set up a negative interaction or they’re too distracted to note signs of impending problems between the pets. Also, a high energy homecoming may set all pets up for future issues with separation anxiety, or inappropriate weeing when greeted.

Please remember that the dogs in your household do not live in a true dog pack nor do the cats live in a true “pride”. In a true pack scenario, new additions are not abrupt and they’re not of adult – puppies are born into groups of known individuals and grow up knowing them. When we add a new pet we are disrupting an established social structure. Think about it: we bring in an unannounced, unrelate stranger

– maybe even an alien species – and expect everyone to be instantly happy. How would most of us react under the same circumstances.

The best times to perform gradual introductions are when the animals are calm. Start by petting the original pets and telling them that it is “okay” **only** if it is truly ok. Do not reward hissing, growling or biting by saying “it’s okay”. When you tell a pet it is “okay” when he is upset, you are not calming him down – you are rewarding inappropriate behavior. If the animals in the household are calm, and either ignore each other or act friendly despite the new addition, you can feed them within sight of the new pet. This distance should be close enough that they can easily see and watch each other, but not so close that they exhibit any signs of distress (e.g., not eating, eating more quickly than usual, hissing, growling, snarling, etc.). Once you identify this distance you can move their food dishes closer together by a few centimeters each day until they are side-by-side. If you ever have an aggressive encounter, back off from that distance and return to the last distance where neither pet reacted. Leave the dishes there for a few days and then gradually start to move them again. Feeding and petting the animals in each other’s presence can teach them that good things happened when they are together and calm. This will not happen if either participant reacts violently.