

INTRODUCING A SECOND CAT

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Many people think cats are solitary creatures and so they never attempt to introduce a second cat into the family. Cats are territorial, so introductions do take some finesse, but they are social creatures. They are solitary hunters because they go for small prey that is only enough for one meal, but they do have a social structure. The security of their social structure is centered around the availability of resources. If you do a gradual introduction and give the cats a reason to like each other, minimize feelings of being threatened, and provide adequate resources, then you have the foundation for success. That said though, just as with some people, there are some cats who simply are not a good match and there are those who really do prefer being the only cat in the home. That's where it's important to take time to know your current cat's personality and needs, and make a careful, thoughtful decision about whether the addition of a second cat will be beneficial. It's also important to make a complementary match.

Once you decide to add a second cat to the family, don't make the huge mistake of simply putting the cats together to work it out. This is horribly stressful, potentially dangerous and will likely set the cats up to become enemies for life. A correct introduction, however, can set the tone for a lifelong friendship.

The Right Introduction Technique

The proper introduction method addresses the emotional and physical needs of both cats. You need to look at the process from the perspective of both cats. The resident cat's take on the situation is that there's an intruder on his turf. From the newcomer's point of view, she suddenly finds herself in unfamiliar and hostile territory. Both cats need to feel secure and that their resources aren't threatened. If they feel as if there's no safety, they'll go into survival mode and that results in extreme stress, panic, fighting and perhaps even spraying. If, however, they have the security of being able to remain in their comfort zones while gradually checking out the new situation, you can keep stress to a minimum. Both cats need safe areas to view as their own sanctuaries during this time. Your resident cat is completely confused as to why he no longer has his familiar territory to himself and the newcomer has the daunting task of becoming familiar with new territory, new people and another cat.

The New Cat's Sanctuary Room

There needs to a room where the newcomer can camp out during the introduction process. This can be any room with a door that can be closed. While in this room she can begin to get comfortable with her new environment in a safe way. Before you begin the actual introduction of the two cats, let the newcomer become familiar with the sights, sounds and smells of the

sanctuary room. Having her in the sanctuary room also gives both cats time to lower their levels of reactivity at the sudden changes going on. Your resident cat will know there's a strange cat in the home but at least she's confined to a small area. The newcomer will also have a safe and uninterrupted ability to investigate the sanctuary room and get to know you. Don't be in a hurry to do the actual introduction. Let each cat get comfortable with this first step before moving on. The more relaxed each cat is, the more successful the introduction will be.

The sanctuary room needs to be equipped with a litter box, food and water, some cozy hiding places, toys, and a scratching post. If the room has a window and you can add a window perch or place a piece of furniture there for the new kitty to enjoy the view, that would be great. If a carrier was used to bring the new kitty home, leave it open in the sanctuary room so she can use that as an extra hideaway. If the newcomer kitty is timid or fearful, being able to stay in the carrier containing her own familiar scent may provide much needed comfort in the beginning. If the cat came from a shelter and had a hiding box in her cage, it's a good idea to bring that home with her so she has something with a familiar scent.



Photo: Pam Johnson-Bennett

I like to set up cat tunnels in the sanctuary room if the new cat is very fearful or timid. Create paper bag tunnels or you can purchase fabric cat tunnels. Set them up in the middle of the room so the cat has a safe and somewhat hidden way to move around the room to get to the different resources. If a cat is fearful, feeling less exposed will lower her stress level. It will also help speed up her desire to start investigating instead of staying hidden under a bed or in the corner of a closet. You can even add a few extra hiding places in the middle of the room by turning boxes upside down and cutting entrance holes in them. You can also purchase a cave-style cat bed to help the newcomer feel a little more invisible while napping.

Use Food

I tell clients that the key to a successful new cat introduction is to *give the cats a reason to like each other*. You can't just keep cats separated and then suddenly open the door, expecting them to instantly form a happy relationship. The proper technique involves having good things happen when they're in the presence of each other, and later, within sight of each other. Initially, this is where food plays a role.

Start by feeding the cats on either side of the closed sanctuary door. Start with each cat far away from the door. Pay attention to where you place the food bowls so you can move them a couple of inches closer next time. Everything needs to be done gradually. How far from the door itself will be determined based on the reactivity level of each cat. If your resident cat will barely step within sight of the door then his food bowl needs to be located well within his comfort zone. In future sessions you can inch the bowl closer.

Keep the sessions positive. If one cat seems nervous and stops eating then it means you put that cat's bowl too close to the door.

Scent

I came up with an easy method for scent introduction many years ago and it has been very successful when introducing a new cat. It's very simple and the only equipment needed will be a pair of clean socks.

Put a clean sock over your hand and very gently rub the new cat along the face to collect some facial pheromones. These are scent chemicals that each cat releases from scent glands. Pheromones are species specific. The facial pheromones are considered the friendly pheromones. Cats rub facially in areas where they feel comfortable. Facial pheromones are low-intensity, comforting scents as opposed to pheromones released from other parts of the cat's body (i.e. spraying). Collecting facial pheromones on the sock is an easy way to start spreading the new cat's scent in the house.

Once you've collected the facial pheromones, place the scented sock in your resident cat's area. This will let him check out the new kitty's scent while keeping both cats completely safe.

I like to use clicker training when doing new cat introductions. I click and reward any positive move the resident cat displays around the sock. I click and reward if the cat walks toward the sock or for anything I want to see the cat do again. If he sniffs the sock, I click and reward. If he just walks by the sock and ignores it I will click and reward. If he gets aggressive, I just ignore it.



Photo: Tom Morales on Unsplash

With clicker training, the cat learns that certain behaviors end in a food reward while others don't. Cats are smart and they soon make the association that it's beneficial to perform the reward-based behaviors.

If you're unfamiliar with clicker training, visit our website at catbehaviorassociates.com to learn more about it. You can buy a clicker at your local pet supply store or online. I recommend a button-style clicker and not the box type because it has a quiet sound. The softer sound is better for cats. If your local store only has box clickers, you can easily buy a button one online. Clickers are very inexpensive. Doing clicker training is optional and you can certainly do the introduction without it, but I find clicker training really helps speed up the process.

Now, back to the sock. Take the mate to that sock and very gently rub around your resident cat's face to collect those nice facial pheromones. Place that sock in the newcomer's room.

Do the sock exchange method a couple times a day. Always use a clean sock each time because you don't want to accidentally rub one cat's scent on the other cat.

In terms of rewarding a cat's behavior around encountering the sock, the behavior doesn't have to be perfect. Reward neutral behavior such as the cat walking by the sock. You're looking for any behavior that shows something positive or neutral – basically, anything you would want to see again.

Next, it's time for the newcomer to start investigating and exploring her new surroundings and begin to spread her scent around the environment. Do this safely, so put your resident cat in a separate room. Once your resident cat is secure in another room, open the sanctuary room door to let the newcomer have a bit of freedom. As she wanders about, she'll be distributing her own scent around the various rooms in the home. Do this exercise a couple of times a day, or as often as the newcomer is comfortable.

Keep toys and treats handy to distract the newcomer if she starts to appear nervous while walking around. Keep the sanctuary room door open so she always has the option to return there on her own.

Visuals

Open the sanctuary room door just a crack while offering meals. Feed the cats within sight of each other but far enough apart so no one feels scared. Keep sessions short, so you may have to offer just a small amount of food before closing the door again. Do several short sessions a day that end happily instead of trying to do one big training session that ends in a fight. If one cat tries to bolt through the door, use a door stop to prevent the door from fully opening. Sit by the door so you can easily close it should tension mount. I also keep a thick towel with me so I can easily visually block their sight of each other if needed. The towel can also be used to toss over the cats if an actual fight breaks out. Never reach in to try to physically break up a fight because you could get injured.



Photo: Alex Bertman on Unsplash

Open the Sanctuary Room Door

Don't be in a hurry to get to this step. Make sure each cat is comfortable with the previous step before moving on. Never rush cat introductions. It's worth taking extra time to ensure everyone is comfortable to avoid fights and unnecessary stress or fear.

When it comes time to open the sanctuary room door, if you're concerned about whether someone might charge through, take the interim step of stacking two or three baby gates across the entrance or install a temporary screen door. This will let the cats view each other without physical contact. When the mealtime session is over, close the sanctuary room door again. You can even use just one baby gate during meal sessions if you stand by the door, ready to close it in case something happens. Even though the cats could easily hop over one gate, it can become a little bit of a barrier to buy you extra time.

Keep doing sessions where the cats see each other while eating or receiving treats. Gradually increase exposure time. Remember to continue the previous step as well where the newcomer

ventures out on her own to continue to spread her scent while the resident cat is secured in another room.

As you gradually increase the time the cats are exposed to each other, if you're doing clicker training, continue to click and reward for any positive or neutral move. I instruct clients to reward the absence of an unwanted behavior. For example, if one cat breaks a stare or walks by the other cat without hissing or swatting. Those are the types of behaviors I click and reward. If you aren't doing clicker training, offer a food treat or verbal praise for any behavior you want to see again.

Playtime

You should be ready to add interactive playtime at this point to help the cats develop positive associations with each other. Hold a fishing pole-type toy in each hand or enlist the help of another family member. You need to do parallel play so each cat has their own toy. Don't set up a situation where the cats compete for one toy. This can create intimidation by one cat. Using one toy will also put the cats near each other and they aren't ready for that. When you use two toys they get to enjoy the game while seeing the other cat in their peripheral vision.

The Overall Environment



Photo: Leighann Blackwood on Unsplash

Set up your home environment to encourage security and adequate territory for both cats. This will be especially important when the cats spend more time together and are no longer separated. Increase vertical space through cat trees and perches. Provide hideaways so the cats have options to avoid each other. Create low, medium and high levels. Adequate elevated options increase the cats' perception of the amount of territory they feel is available to them. Vertical territory helps a cat feel safe because he can't get ambushed from behind. Being elevated also creates more warning time to escape because the cat can see the other cat coming into view from a greater distance. Vertical territory is also a way to display status and that may help cats avoid physical confrontations. A higher-ranking cat may choose to jump to an elevated area to show indifference instead of engaging in a fight.

Environmental enrichment is beneficial on so many levels, even for a single cat, but when you have a multicat home, it gives the cats ways to divert attention, release energy, and reduce stress. Set up food-dispensing toys, puzzle toys and other opportunities for each cat to enjoy discovery, stalking, mock hunting and exercise. A boring environment can lead to cats picking on each other or engaging in counter-productive behavior.



Photo: Eric Han on Unsplash

The availability of resources is vital to multicat harmony. This means, multiple litter boxes and scratching posts in home. The litter boxes shouldn't be lined up in the same room. One cat shouldn't have to pass through another cat's core area. Place a box in each cat's preferred core area and while you're at it, place a third box in a neutral area. The placement of valued resource items in each cat's preferred area will give the cats more choice and helps toward peaceful co-existence.

Continue mealtime training sessions where the cats eat in the presence of each other. Don't ever ask them to eat out of the same bowl. It's a good idea to feed in separate bowls anyway because it'll make it easier on you if one cat ever needs to be on a special therapeutic diet. And remember, cats aren't social eaters so never place bowls side by side no matter how well the cats get along.

Don't Rush the Process

The most stressed-out or frightened cat will set the pace of the introduction. One cat may be ready to make friends but if the other cat is not, then proceed at the stressed kitty's pace. Introductions take time so don't set a schedule of when you want them both to get along.

Need More Help?

For more specific information on cat behavior and training, refer to my books, *Think Like a Cat* and *CatWise*. You can also check out the book *Cat vs. Cat*, which deals exclusively with multicat issues. The books are available at bookstores everywhere, through your favorite online book retail site and on the website, catbehaviorassociates.com. If you have a question regarding your cat's health, please contact your veterinarian. This article is not intended as a replacement for your cat's veterinary care and is not dispensing medical advice.

About Pam Johnson-Bennett, CCBC

Pam is a Certified Cat Behavior Consultant and best-selling author of 8 books on cat behavior. She starred in the Animal Planet series *Psycho Kitty*, seen in Canada and the UK. She was vice president of the International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants and founded their Cat

Division, where she served 8 years as Chair. She has served on advisory boards for the American Humane Association as well as other animal welfare organizations. She lectures internationally on cat behavior and makes frequent television and radio appearances. Previously, she was the cat behavior columnist for Cats magazine, Modern Cat magazine, The Daily Cat, and Cat Fancy online. She was also the resident cat behavior expert for Yahoo and iVillage online. She is considered a pioneer in the field of cat behavior consulting, having started her career in 1982. Some of her books are used as textbooks in behavior courses and she has influenced many practicing in the field today. Her ground-breaking book, *Think Like a Cat*, is considered the cat bible by veterinarians, shelters, and cat owners worldwide.

Pam owns Cat Behavior Associates, LLC, a veterinarian-referred cat behavior consultation business in Nashville, TN.