

Introducing Your New Dog to Your Resident Cat

Introducing a new rescue dog to a resident cat is a process that requires patience, management, and a lot of high-value treats. It is tempting to just "let them work it out," but that approach is risky for the cat and stressful for the dog. The goal is to create a calm, neutral relationship where both animals feel safe.

The key to a successful introduction is **gradual exposure**. You want to prevent practicing "bad habits" like your dog chasing your cat.

Phase 1: Scent Swapping (Days 1–3)

Before they ever see each other, they should get to know each other's "perfume."

- **The Swap:** Gently rub a towel on the dog and place it in the cat's "territory". Do the same with a cat-scented towel (or bedding) for the dog.
- **Room Swapping:** Let the cat explore the room where the dog has been sleeping while the dog is out for a walk. This allows them to investigate the other's scent without the pressure of a physical presence.

Phase 2: Visual Barriers (The "Gate" Phase)

Once both animals are calm and behaving normally near the other's scent, move to visual contact.

- **Use a Baby Gate:** Place a sturdy baby gate (or two stacked on top of each other) between two rooms.
- **The "Look and Treat":** When the dog looks at the cat through the gate and remains calm, give the dog a treat. Give the cat lots of treats to help create good associations with the dog being in the space.
- **Keep it Short:** These sessions should last only 2–5 minutes. You want to end the session *before* anyone gets over-excited or stressed.

Phase 3: Controlled Face-to-Face

Only move to this step when the dog is consistently relaxed (sitting, lying down, or ignoring the cat) at the gate.

- **Leashed Control:** Keep the dog on a short, loose lead. Do **not** let the dog lunge or move toward the cat.
- **Vertical Space:** Ensure the cat has "escape routes"—high shelves, cat trees, or furniture the dog cannot reach. A cat who feels trapped is a cat who will lash out or become fearful.
- **Treat Heavily:** Reward the dog for staying focused on you (or their toy) while the cat is in the room.

Reading the Red Flags

If you see these behaviors, go back a step in the process:

- **The Dog:** Stiffening, intense staring (hyper-focus), whining, or lunging. These are signs of a high prey drive or over-arousal.
- **The Cat:** Excessive hiding, refusing to eat, or "swat-and-run" tactics. This indicates the cat does not yet feel safe around the dog.

Important Safety Tips

- **Never Leave Them Unsupervised:** Until months have passed with zero incidents, they should never be left alone in a room together.
- **Separate Resources:** Keep the litter box and cat food in a "dog-free zone." Most dogs find cat food (and cat "presents" in the litter box) irresistible, which can lead to conflict. You can do this by getting a baby gate that has a cat door built in, so the cat is able to enter the room but the dog cannot.
- **Exercise the Dog First:** A tired dog is much less likely to have the energy to pester a cat. Do a long walk or a training session before any planned introduction.