BUSTING THE MYTH

FIGHTING LIKE CATS AND DOGS

Can cats and dogs peacefully coexist or are they destined to fight like... well, cats and dogs?

By Alana Stevenson

Photo by Robin Burkett of Paw Prints Photography. To see more of her work or to schedule an appointment, visit www.pawprintsphotography.com.

Introducing your new dog to your existing pets can take time, but they can coexist happily together. Many dogs are quite gentle with cats, while some need training and guidance—others need management. Unfortunately, when owners introduce dogs to cats, and vice versa, the usual scenario is the dog chases the cat, and the poor kitty ends up hiding, and subsequently living, in the bedroom, spare room or basement. This is unnecessary and not fair to either animal. Your cat should not be, and does not have to be, relegated to a basement. Below are some helpful tips to follow when introducing a dog and a cat to each other.

If you have a dog who is shy, fearful, or timid, and a kitty who is aggressive, territorial or confident, reverse some of these suggestions.

A Restful Place

Designate a room or location in the house that is quiet and entirely your cat's territory. Teach your dog that he is not allowed in this area. Use a gate or install a cat door to keep this area off limits to your dog.

Your dog should not have access to litter boxes or to your cat's food. In addition, your cat should not be forced to dodge your dog or pass your dog to get to his or her food bowl or litter pan.

Make sure your cat has extra hiding spots and places to climb to escape from your dog. Invest in a few good cat trees or cat condos. Use Feliway (a synthetic pheromone) plug-ins to calm and soothe your kitty while she is adjusting to the new addition.

Let your dog and cat get used to each others' smells and sounds through a closed door. Reward your dog for showing calm behavior. Treat and feed your kitty when your dog is nearby. When your dog is calmer and more mild-mannered around your cat, your cat will relax around your dog.

Successful Introductions

Your kitty should be in rooms first whenever possible. At least initially, your cat should get more attention from you.

Exercise your dog before introducing your dog to your cat. If your dog has just run four or five miles or has been on a long hike, he will likely be less energetic, and hopefully a bit calmer when meeting your cat.

Use a front-clip body harness when introducing your dog to your cat for the first time and make sure to have your dog on a leash. You may even consider having him on a leash for the first couple of weeks because it will give you more control. It will also prevent your dog from chasing your cat and will allow you to reward him for ignoring your kitty. Reward your dog for behaving gently around your cat. Most importantly, reward your dog anytime he looks away from your cat.

Feed your cat and dog together. If your cat is afraid of your dog, feed them in

separate rooms, but so they can visually see each other. This way, you can begin to establish a positive association between them.

Always place your kitty on higher surfaces than your dog. This not only protects your cat, but makes your kitty feel more confident. If your kitty is less likely to run, your dog will be less likely to chase.

Good Manners Go a Long Way

Teach your dog polite manners. Train your dog using positive reinforcement when your cat is in the room. This will teach your dog how to behave when the cat is present and teach him to listen to you.

Engage your dog in play when your kitty is in the room. If your dog does not chase or pursue your cat, he should be given a fantastic reward.

Give your dog and cat reasons to like each other. Feed them extra good food and treats when they see each other. Prevent any negative interactions or altercations from occurring, and manage the environment so that your dog can be rewarded for exhibiting friendly, non-threatening behaviors.

Prevent your dog from chasing your cat by immediately interrupting your dog and redirecting your dog to a more appropriate behavior, such as his favorite chew toy.

When you are not there to supervise, your dog and cat should be separated until you know they will behave well with each other. With a little common sense, patience and perseverance it's possible for your pets to coexist peacefully. If after trying all of these tips your pets still do not get along, consult an expert animal trainer or behaviorist for help. ND

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FAST FRIENDS: 13-year-old Louis the cat lives with owners Tina and Alyssa in Arlington, VA, along with their laid-back pup Boudreaux—whom they adopted in September 2008 from A Forever Home. "Tina purchased a very nice bed for Boudreaux and had his name embroidered on it," explains Alyssa. "Louis sleeps with Boudreaux on that bed so often that she keeps saying we should have Louis' name put on it, too."