

DOG-CAT INTRODUCTIONS

Bringing home a new dog or cat is likely going to be a very fun and exciting experience for all human family members. In all the excitement it is easy to forget that your resident cat or dog may feel differently about the new addition. It is our job to facilitate positive and rewarding introductions between dog and cat family members.

While we would all like our new pet to become fast friends with the resident pet, it is more realistic to expect that it may take a while for them to become buddies. Be prepared for the acclimation period to last up to one (1) month before a face-to-face greeting.

CAT SAFE ZONE

First and foremost, establish a Cat Safe Zone in your house. This is an area in your home that can be completely closed off so that your dog cannot access it. The room needs to have adequate space for a litterbox, food & water dishes, toys and places to hide or get up high. Ideally, the room will have a window or other source for natural light. It is important that cats are able to express natural behaviors while in the room such as jumping and scratching – as this will eliminate some of the stress associated with being isolated in this room during the acclimation period.

OBEDIENCE

During the acclimation period, while your cat is in the Cat Safe Zone, take this time to work on obedience cues with your dog. In addition to the basic obedience cues such as “Sit,” “Down,” and “Stay,” teach him/her the “Leave It” and “Watch Me” cues.

PHEROMONES

Consider adding Dog Appeasing Pheromone (D.A.P.) diffusers in the area where your dog(s) spend most of the time and a Feliway diffuser in the Cat Safe Zone. Studies have shown that these particular pheromone diffusers may assist in reducing stress levels.

DESENSITIZATION

Begin the desensitization process with scent swapping. For this exercise, you will need two (2) used, but clean socks (i.e. one that has been washed and dried). Rub one sock on your dog and seal it in a plastic bag. Rub another sock on your cat’s cheeks and seal it in a plastic bag. Open the bag and allow your dog to smell the cat-scented sock. Immediately follow the sniffing with a dime-sized yummy treat like hot dogs, cheese or chicken. Repeat the same process with your cat for the dog-scented sock, using a bit of canned chicken or tuna fish as the reward. Complete the scent swapping activity a minimum of three (3) times a day for 1 week.

The second part of desensitization involves feeding both your dog and cat at the same time on either side of the Cat Safe Zone door. This helps both your dog and your cat associate the presence of each other with good things – food. It is important to monitor the body language of both your cat and dog for signs of being uncomfortable during this exercise. If either your dog or cat are uncomfortable, move the food dishes farther away from the door or go back to scent swapping.



The third part of desensitization involves room swapping. After one (1) week of scent swapping, confine your dog to another room and allow your cat to explore the rest of the house for a period of one (1) to two (2) hours. If you have another safe space in which to confine your cat for a few moments, you can place your dog on a leash and allow the dog to explore and sniff the Cat Safe Zone.








VISUAL CONTACT

Once your dog and cat are comfortable eating on either side of the Cat Safe Zone door, you can proceed with supervised visual contact. Set up a physical barrier (such as a tall baby gate) so that your cat and dog can see each other but not directly access each other. If your dog attempts to go right up to the barrier, place your dog on a leash. Reward both your dog and cat with yummy treats for calm body language. If necessary, use the obedience cues mentioned above to help your dog focus on you instead of your cat. If you are unable to get your dog to focus on you, move him/her away from the barrier until he/she can.

FACE-TO-FACE GREETING

Once your dog and cat are able to “hang out” calmly next to each other on either side of the physical barrier, you can proceed with a supervised face-to-face greeting. With your dog on a leash and super yummy treats ready, allow your cat to move freely about. At no point should you have either your dog or your cat in your arms. Reward your dog for calm behavior and be ready to use your obedience cues to have your dog focus on you if he/she is showing too much interest in your cat. Repeat supervised face-to-face greetings until you are confident that your dog will not chase after or play too roughly with your cat.

PAWSITIVELY HELPFUL HINTS

-  Ensure your cat always has a Cat Safe Zone that your dog cannot access, even after successful co-habitation. This zone is where your cat’s food, water and litterbox should be kept.
-  Offer lots of low to the ground hiding places (boxes, crates, shelves) and vertical spaces (shelves on the wall, cat towers) for your cat to go to feel safe. Ideally, your cat should be able to have enough vertical space that he/she can traverse a large portion of the house without ever having to touch the floor.
-  Continue working on obedience cues with your dog with lots of positive reinforcement, particularly when he/she is around your cat.
-  If your dog is chasing, lunging, growling, biting at or stalking your cat – and the above steps did not help – it’s time to call a professional for assistance.
-  Several short sessions are better than a few long sessions.
-  Always stop a session on a positive note.
-  If you get frustrated during a session, stop and try again later.

Want more help with your dog or cat’s behavior? AHS offers public training and private consultations!

Dog Training: visit azhumane.org/dogtraining

Cat Consultations: email catbehavior@azhumane.org

