

Tails to Tell Animal Rescue Shelter Ltd.

Cat Adoption

New Introductions

Cats are social and territorial therefore, introductions require a little finesse, a lot of patience, and let's not forget the all-important ingredient: bribery! Even though a new cat introduction may take some work on your part, it's a small amount of time given what the reward will be; cats who learn to co-exist peacefully and, in most cases, form close relationships.

While there are many people who may brag about how they just 'tossed' the cats in together and let them work it out for themselves, that's absolutely, positively, no-doubt-about-it, the worst thing you can do. Unlike dogs, cats are not pack animals and are not quickly receptive to newcomers. The biggest mistake owners make is not preparing ahead of time. It's only after the fur is flying that they realize there's a problem, and then they have to begin the process of damage control. No matter whether you are adding a second cat to your household or your seventh cat, there is no introduction shortcut. Do it right the first time, and you'll save yourself and your cats much grief.

This may be ridiculously obvious but stop to consider if it is appropriate to add another cat to your household. Will this be a benefit or detriment to your current feline family? Do you feel all the cats will have adequate territory? Are you able to dedicate the time and patience required to do an introduction? Even when a new cat takes you by surprise, such as in a rescue situation, you should still set up a game plan that will cause the least amount of stress to everyone concerned.

If you are dealing with any sort of litter problem, whether it's inappropriate elimination or spray-marking, get it resolved *before* you add further stress to the situation by introducing another cat. If your cats have a litter box problem now, it'll turn into a bigger one when the newcomer arrives.

The Sanctuary Room

When you bring a cat into a new home, it is absolutely necessary that he or she have his or her own safe litter sanctuary room. Even if your cat won't have any other pets to deal with, a sanctuary room is still needed. The newcomer needs a quiet, safe area where she can get her bearings, and the residents don't need to have a new cat immediately in their faces, intruding upon their territory.

The sanctuary room gives the newcomer an opportunity to get familiar with the scents of her new home. It also gives her time to get to know you and begin the trust-building process. For a rescued cat that has been through a physical or emotional trauma, a sanctuary room enables her to make the transition in calm, comforting way.

A sanctuary room can be any room in your home that has a door. The cat doesn't need a lot of space right now; she needs safety and security. Think of how overwhelming it would be for a little cat to try to get comfortable and find her way around a home. She isn't going to remember the location of the litter box in time to take care of business or where she last saw her food. This is especially overwhelming and unfair to a kitten, which will need a convenient set up since her litter box habits are still in the learning stage. If you're bringing in an adult cat, you have to consider the stress factor as well. You don't want your new cat spending the first couple of months hiding behind furniture or under the bed because she is too threatened to get her bearings.

Preparing The Sanctuary Room

The first rule is that the room shouldn't be empty. There's nothing more frightening for a cat than not having a place to hide. It's important to set up additional places so the cat doesn't just dive under the bed if you're using a bedroom and stay put for weeks. Boxes are simple and effective hiding places. Put one or two on their sides and line them with towels or T-shirts that contain your scent. If the cat is truly terrified, use the boxes, or paper bags, to make tunnels for her. Make sure the size of the box and the holes you cut match the size of the cat. Soft-sided fabric tunnels also work.

Place the food and water bowls on one side of the room and the litter box on the opposite wall. The litter box shouldn't be located close to the food because cats don't eliminate where they eat. No matter how small the sanctuary, make sure you've separated the food from the litter box as much as possible.

The litter box should be uncovered. If you're bringing in an adult cat and she had a previous home, try to use the same type of litter she's accustomed to and then gradually transition to the kind of litter you use with the rest of your cats mixing in a small amount of the new litter into the current brand, slowly increasing the amount over the course of several days.

Dust Off Your Cat-Proofing Kills

Look around the sanctuary room with a fine-tooth comb and do some serious cat-proofing. Secure dangling electrical cords, remove delicate knickknacks, and make sure lamps aren't top heavy. Use cord shorteners for the cords on Venetian blinds, and so forth. If the newcomer is a kitten, coat electrical cords with a bitter apple antichew cream. Plug a night-light so you won't have to flick on a bright light when you enter the room to check on the cat. This will be especially important if you're dealing with a rescued cat or one who is very frightened in the new surroundings.

Friendly Pheromones

If the newcomer is an adult, use Feliway in the room. This is a behaviour modification product that contains synthetic feline facial pheromones. Cats facially rub where they feel comfortable, and the scent helps them feel reassured and calm. Feliway comes in a plug-in diffuser and a spray bottle. If you use the spray bottle, you'll have to spray every twelve hours. For the sanctuary room, I'd recommend you use the diffuser because you'll make your life so much simpler - it lasts about a month and covers approximately 650 square feet.

Scratching

The sanctuary will need a scratching post. This is not only important so the cat can condition her claws and stretch her muscles, but it's comforting for a newcomer entering unfamiliar territory to be able to see her claw marks and recognize the scent left by the pheromones in her paw pads. If you're adopting a kitten, it's also important to have a scratching post in the sanctuary room so she can get a head start on appropriate training.

If possible, don't use one of the scratching posts currently in your home in the sanctuary room. Your newcomer doesn't need to be overwhelmed by the markings and smells of the other cats right off the bat. Also, you want to cause minimal disruption to your resident cats, so moving one of their posts would not be a good idea.

There are horizontal pads such as inexpensive corrugated cardboard scratchers that cats love, as well as the vertical carpet covered ones. Since you probably won't know whether the newcomer has a preference for the horizontal or vertical scratching or both, you'll be covering your bases and protecting your furniture if you can provide both.

Toys

You'll need some toys for the cat to enjoy during solo object play and at least one interactive fishing pole toy. The interactive toy will be an important tool for building trust so you can keep your distance while the cat learns to associate you with positive experiences. For solo toys you can get a couple of furry toy mice and some crinkly balls at the pet supply store. Choose appropriate toys for the cat's age, size, and temperament. Don't get huge, intimidating toys for a kitten or a frightened cat.

Extras

Cats love and need elevated perches, so add a window perch or a cat tree to the room if you can. At the very least, put a cat bed on top of a box or piece of furniture or lay a couple of extra pillows or folded towels on the bed.

Preparing The Rest Of Your Home

Let's start with litter boxes. You may need to increase the number of them in your home. Even if you're going from just one cat to two, that doesn't mean they'll share a box. If you have several cats, adding another kitty may throw off the litter box balance, so keep an eye on things and be ready to up the number of boxes as you have cats or at least as close to that as possible. The addition of a new cat is also a good time to install a cat tree or window perch, especially if you are going from one cat to two.

Cat-Proofing

Even though you may have adult cats that no longer play with cords or knock things over, that may not be the case of the newcomer, especially if she's a youngster. To be safe, just as you did in the sanctuary room, go through your home and secure dangling cords, coat electrical cords with a bitter-apple anti-chew cream, make sure window screens are secure, and move breakable items to more secure locations.

Those Friendly Pheromones Again

Just as Feliway may help the adult newcomer feel more comfortable; those pheromones will benefit the cats on the other side of the sanctuary room door. Be sure to spray around the sanctuary room door or plug in the diffuser if you have outlets in that area.

Pre-Introduction Veterinary Checkups

Your veterinarian should see the newcomer before you bring her into your home. She should get all appropriate tests and, if needed, be vaccinated and dewormed. The veterinarian will also check for parasites such as fleas, ticks, and ear mites because you certainly don't want to introduce those little critters into your home. Depending upon your case specifics and the health of all the cats involved, your veterinarian can make a recommendation on how long before you should quarantine the new kitty and whether she needs to be rested before exposure to your resident cats.

Make sure all your cats are up-to-date on vaccinations. If you don't vaccinate some or all of your indoor cats due to age or medical concerns, don't bring an unfamiliar cat into the environment without first checking with your veterinarian and taking the necessary safety precautions.

The Introduction Process

The big day has finally arrived. Bring the cat (in her carrier) into the home and go right to the sanctuary room, which you will have already set up. If the cat is an adult, open the carrier and then leave the room. This way, she can stay in the carrier until she feels comfortable enough to start investigating the room and won't be intimidated by your presence. Have food and water set up for her, although she probably won't be interested in it right away. She may, however, appreciate that the litter box is so conveniently located. It's good to leave the newcomer alone for a while so you can concentrate on your resident kitties, which may or may not be aware of what just took place. When you leave the room, don't overcompensate for the situation by cuddling excessively or your cats will be convinced that something big is up. Be as casual and as normal as possible.

If the newcomer is a kitten, you may want to spend a little time with her before leaving the room to make sure she knows where everything is located.

Keep a robe in the sanctuary room during the initial stages. This way, you can hold her without getting an overwhelming amount of her scent on you. Be sure to wash your hands afterward as well. Even though your cats will surely be able to detect the smallest amount of the newcomer's scent on you, there's no need to present an in-your-face insult when you go to pet one of your resident kitties.

If one or two of the cats hang out by the sanctuary door and appear upset, you can conduct an interactive play session right there and then gradually entice the cat away from the door. You can't keep the cats away from the door (and actually, you do want them to start investigating), but by doing play sessions, you may be able to keep a kitty from camping out at the door and getting very upset.

Interactive playtime with the newcomer is an important trust-building exercise to start immediately. If the newcomer is a kitten, the playtime will help her bond with you and also help her work off some of that endless kitten energy. If the newcomer is an adult, especially if she's frightened, the interaction will help her stay within her comfort zone while playing. This is a great way to build trust.

There are two important aspects to the introduction process that you must remember. The first is that the process must be done *one sense at a time*, and the other is that *you must give the cats a reason to like each other*. Mere separation is half the process. You can keep cats separated for months, but if you don't help them form positive associations with each other when they do finally meet, the introduction is likely to fail. By one sense at a time, we refer to how the cats will first smell or hear each other before they see or touch each other. Scent will play a big role in this process, and your cats' noses will really be working overtime. By restricting the process to one sense at a time, emotions stand a much better chance of staying in control... relatively speaking.

Once the newcomer is in the sanctuary room, you may need to leave things at this stage for a while before progressing. Your cats may already be upset over the fact that someone's on the other side of the door. You need to let them get used to this and give the newcomer time to get situated. Use your best judgement concerning the time to start actively introducing the kitties. You know your cats better than anyone else, so you should be able to tell when it's okay to proceed. For example, your cats should be on their usual routine (for the most part), willing to play, and not redirecting aggression toward companion cats. The newcomer must be secure and comfortable as well before beginning or else she'll just spend all of her time hiding. There is no set time for how long introductions should take. Every cat is an individual, and every owner's set of circumstances is different. Some cats can breeze through this process in a matter of days, and others take weeks or even months. Don't be discouraged if your introduction takes longer than the one of your neighbours did for their cats. Best advice to you is to let the cats set the pace.

Catwise Caution

If you're tempted to speed up the process by holding the newcomer up to one of the resident cats so they can touch noses. *Don't do it!* Splash some cold water on your face and get back to feline reality. Any forced interaction will result in disaster and, very likely, injury as well.

The Sock Exchange

The first sense to introduction is scent. The sock exchange will help the newcomer and residents to begin to get to know one another in a very safe, controlled way. Pheromones are scent chemicals that tell a lot about a cat to others. This sharing of information of the friendly facial pheromones is a great first 'how do you do'.

Take a few pairs of socks and put one sock on your hand. Now rub one of your resident cats gently along the cheek to collect some facial pheromones. Use a different sock for each cat so you don't cause tension. If you have a large cat community, don't rub everyone at the same time. Start with one or two you feel will be more receptive to the new cat. Choose a sociable but calm cat to prevent intimidating the newcomer. This will come in handy later because you'll be introducing those cats first.

Once you've collected the scent on one sock, go into the sanctuary room and, with a clean sock, rub the newcomer around the face if she's comfortable enough to allow it. Leave the resident's sock in the newcomer's room and take the newcomer's sock into the main part of your home. If the newcomer is frightened or you feel rubbing her cheeks will damage any trust building you've already done, then don't worry about it. You can just place a couple of clean socks in one of her beds and, after she has been lying on them, take those out to the main part of the house for the resident cats. Don't use anything bigger than a sock. You don't want to overwhelm anyone with something as big as a scented towel.

The sock exchange can also help you determine how upset or calm a particular cat may be. If the cat goes crazy and starts hissing, growling, and attacking the sock, chances are this will not be a record-breaking introduction in terms of speed. If the cat sniffs the sock and shows only mild interest, that is a good sign. Even if the cat does not show a strong negative reaction to the shock, don't be discouraged. Introductions are tough in the beginning, but that's not necessarily an indication of how the cats will ultimately get along. It's normal to experience a bumpy road at first, and it's much safer to let the cats work out their 'concerns' on the sock rather than each other.

Do the sock exchange several times a day until you feel everyone has become somewhat familiar with one another's scents.

The Room Exchange

To begin, put the resident cats in a separate area of the home so the newcomer can safely start to become familiar with a larger territory without fear of being ambushed. As she moves around the house she'll also deposit more of her scent, which will help your resident cats adjust to her ever-increasing presence.

When you let the newcomer out of the sanctuary room for the exchange, just open the door and let her walk out on her own so she'll know the sanctuary room is right behind her if it's all moving too fast. Don't pick her up and drop her in the middle of the living room because she'll probably be frightened and will just end up hiding. If she starts to look nervous, you can use an interactive toy to entice her. If she's food motivated, offer a treat as she ventures out.

It's now time for your resident cats to check out the newcomer's territory. Obviously you'll have to make sure the newcomer is safely in another room. Depending on how many cats you have and their personalities, you should start with the one or two kitties most likely to accept the newcomer. One thing to watch for when doing a room switch is *redirected aggression*. If one of the resident cats gets too upset, she may lash out at a companion cat, which is why it's important to be careful about which cats you let into the sanctuary room initially. It may be better to do it one at a time. Also, don't just dump a resident cat into the sanctuary room; rather, open the door and let her decide how far and fast she wants to go.

If you live in a small apartment and there aren't enough rooms to do this, you may wish to enlist the help of a family member so you don't have to play cowboy to a herd of cats. If you live alone, ask a cat-loving friend or neighbour to help. You can put the newcomer in her carrier and have the neighbour take her out of the apartment temporarily while the kitties check out the sanctuary room.

After the room exchange, reward your cats with a meal or a treat. Always end these training sessions on a positive note. Keep the session short. What's most important is the newcomer's discovery of the main part of the home. It isn't as crucial that the resident cats explore the sanctuary, so if they get upset, don't continue it.

Do this a couple of times a day until you feel the cats are comfortable or at least getting comfortable with one another's scents. It might take just one day to it might take several. Again, let your cats set the pace.

Pleased To Meet You

Okay, now that everyone is getting comfortable with new scents, it's time to let the cats see one another. Their exposure should be brief, positive, and at a safe distance. Remember one of the rules mentioned earlier: *You must give the cats a reason to like each other*. Open the sanctuary room door and let the cats see one another while everyone is offered a treat or a meal. Make sure to offer the newcomer and residents their treats on opposite sides of the room. When using cat treats, break them into small pieces so you don't interfere with regular nutrition. The cats will still view it as an extra-special treat. If your cats don't like the commercial treats, you can use small pieces of shredded cooked chicken.

If they're really food motivated, you can feed their meals in the presence of one another. Place the bowls on one side of the room. You want to show the cats that good things happen when they're in one another's company. If some of the cats aren't food motivated, you can use toys as a form of diversion. If one cat gets too focused on another, you can shift her attention to the toy. It's okay if the newcomer chooses to stay at the far end of the sanctuary room. End the session immediately after everyone has had a snack or a few minutes of playtime. It's better to do several thirty-second sessions that end positively than to force the cats together for half an hour and end the session unexpectedly with hissing or growling. It may be tempting to keep a session going longer because the cats seem to be getting along, but remember there will be time for that later. It's worth taking the extra time now to do things right in order to set the kitties up with the best chance of being friends. In the beginning, be conservative.

Periodically, take the tiniest amount of soiled litter from the newcomer's litter box (use no more than an eighth teaspoon to start) and place it in one of the litter boxes that the resident cats use. Don't use more to start with or you'll risk creating a litter box aversion problem. Then take a tiny amount of soiled litter from one of the main litter boxes (again, no more than one-eighth teaspoon) and place it in the newcomer's box. If the cats show a negative reaction, back off and next time use an even smaller amount.

Making Progress

When cats interact for longer periods of time (an hour or more), keep the sanctuary set up because you'll want to put the newcomer back in there at night and when you're not around to supervise. As for supervision, keep it casual in appearance so the cats don't feel as if you're hovering over them. You want to see their reactions, and they may not act as naturally if you're too close. Some cats feel more secure when the owner is nearby, so you'll have to create a balance: present but casual and relaxed.

If you sense too much focus on the newcomer or growing tension, toss out some treats or a toy to divert them. Anything that will be viewed as positive to shift their mind-set will work. Keep an interactive toy nearby to use if you notice one cat starting to stalk another, and try to use it *before* an actual incident occurs. In a pinch, if one cat is about to attack another, you can make a loud noise or clap your hands, but the more you can keep things positive, the faster the cats will accept one another. Don't get upset or punish any of your resident cats for showing aggression. This will only undo the positive associations you're trying to establish.

Watch for subtle threats. A direct stare and raised hindquarters is an easy posture for owners to miss but is most intimidating to a new cat. You may want to put bells on the collars of the cats that consistently display aggression so everyone can better monitor their whereabouts.

Whether the introduction takes days, week, or months, don't get discouraged. You have to go at the pace that suits the cats. You may find some phases of the introduction go smoothly, but then you'll hit a snag. That's normal, so just try to hang in there.

What To Do If Things Aren't Going Well

Sometimes a newcomer may have trouble leaving the safety of the sanctuary room. If that's the case, try slowing down the introduction. You may be exposing the cats to one another for too long a period or you may have rushed through one phase of the process. If things aren't going well despite slowing the pace, temporarily put up a screen door to the sanctuary room in place of the regular door. You can buy inexpensive screen doors at a home improvement store. If you want to leave the regular door up, get three baby gates and put them in the doorway - one on top of another. Get the hinged-kind that swing open so that you won't have to take the gates down every time you want to enter or exit the room. The screen door or the baby gates will allow the cats to see one another. This method isn't needed in most cases, but you might feel safer taking this middle step before going to unrestricted access.