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STRENGTHENING THE HUMAN – ANIMAL CONNECTION

How to Add a New Cat to a Household With an Existing Cat

We have all heard the horror stories about feline introductions gone awry. However, adding a cat to a home with an existing cat (or cats) can be done successfully if we do our homework on this mysterious and marvelous species. Understanding feline ancestral information allows us to make proper choices when introducing a new cat to a home with an existing cat or cats. (Please refer to the Handout on Feline Social Systems).

The ancestor of our modern housecat is *Felis Sylvestris Libyca*, the African Wildcat. These cats were, and still are, solitary hunters and, in this respect, are very independent. However, familiar cats can and do live in groups if resources are plentiful. The females will live together and raise their young together so that, while some are out hunting, others remain to watch over the young. Cats are comfortable with the proximity of familiar cats but unfamiliar cats are met with aggression.

They live in a system of home ranges (where the cat hangs out most of the time) and a common territory (where the cat hunts but only when other familiar cats are not using it). Scent marking and claw marking are used to let others know the territory is being used.

Now let's look at our house cats, which have retained much of the behavior of their ancestors. In a typical, multi-cat household, the entire home is the common territory, used by all of the cats but individual cats may have certain areas of the home where they hang out/rest/sleep. These areas could be considered their home range.

Being knowledgeable about cats' social structure helps us to successfully house more than one cat. We know that cats will share their territory with other familiar cats. *The longer a "new" cat has been in the house, the more likely the resident cat will consider it "familiar"*. Behavior specialists agree that the magic number is six months. It is at this point that cats begin to show acceptance behaviors and eliminate aggression. Since unfamiliar cats are instinctually driven out of a cat's territory it would be unwise to bring in a new cat and plunk it down in the house. Having a stranger invade one's territory can cause fear, anxiety and stress to not only the resident cat but the new cat as well.

Studies have shown that, when adding a cat to a home, neither age, sex or size (of the cat, of the house, of the number of cats already there) matters in regards to success of the introduction. Only two things really matter – the length of time the cats are together, and the individual personalities of the cats.

The following steps can help ensure success when adding a new cat (as long as their personalities mesh):

- 1. Complete separation:** The new cat is placed in a comfortable, confined area like a guest room. If there is a crack under the door it should be blocked. There needs to be total physical and visual separation. The new cat is given a sleeping area, its own food and water and a litter box. Wait until the new cat is very settled in and comfortable and then go to step 2.

- 2. Scent shifting:** Don't remove the new or resident cat's favorite bed but take a blanket or towel or something each cat has rested on and put it in the other cat's area. Don't rub the towel on the other cat – that can be too intrusive – but rather, just set the towel in the other's area so they can smell the other cat's scent and become familiar with it. Do this daily until both cats are comfortable with it and relaxed.

(There is no set time period for the separation – rather, let it go on longer than you think it needs to go on before going to step 3. In other words, too long is fine but not long enough could be disastrous.)

- 3. Visual contact from a distance:** *This is based on the behavior of cats in the wild. Wild cats will sit 50 feet apart and just look at each other in order to become more familiar with each other.* See diagram below as one example of how they could view each other from a distance.



They can be allowed to “view” each other from a distance 2-3 times per day at first. It is great to combine this step with Operant Conditioning to help them establish a positive association with seeing the other cat. Sit with the resident cat and have a bag of really tasty treats handy. Every time the resident cat looks at the new cat, give the resident cat a treat. Do this repeatedly. Then you can sit with the new cat and repeat the “look” and “treat” combination. When both cats are comfortable with this move on to step 4.

- 4. Allow new cat access to house alone:** Isolate the resident cat in another room with its own food, water and litter box and let the new cat out of his room to roam around the house. This helps with scent transfer but also allows the new cat to learn about its new surroundings. Do this daily for days or weeks – continue it until both cats are comfortable with it. This method re-creates a “home range” with a common territory. When they are fine with this step it's time to let them live together.
- 5. Add extra resources:** When it is time for both cats to roam freely, make sure there are extra resources available so that there will not be competition for resting areas, food, water or litter boxes. Having extra litter boxes all over the house is important – you can always remove some of them later but always keep at least one box per cat plus one extra. Boxes on every floor of the house is important. Several food and water dishes in different areas of the house is wise so they don't have to take turns or sit side-by-side to eat. Adding vertical space is also a great idea such as cat trees and towers. A food dish can also be placed on a cat tree or tower. Several scratching posts throughout the house is advised. Most importantly, lots of praise and treats when they are in the presence of each other to help foster a positive association with each other. Time the praise and treats for when they are acting right – not when they are hissing, etc, or we'll reinforce the wrong behavior.
- 6. Common Sense:** When choosing a new cat, try to pick a cat with a personality that's similar to the resident cat. For example, if the resident cat is shy and skittish, don't choose a rambunctious, in-your-face, type of cat as the new cat. If the resident cat is old, don't add a silly kitten to the mix.