

Introducing a new cat into the household

Tips and tricks





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Bringing home a new cat or kitten can be very exciting. However, introducing your new cat to a new environment and existing pet cats or dogs can be challenging and stressful for all. It is important to remember that your new cat will have gone through a lot of change before arriving into your care. They may have been recently separated from their mum and siblings, perhaps lived in a shelter, had recent surgery or lived in conditions you are not aware of. With a good amount of patience, observation and understanding, your new cat will settle into your home in good time.

Your home is the safest place for your cat, by not letting your cat roam freely you are keeping them safe from car accidents, dog attacks and injuries from cat fights, as well as keeping native wildlife safe and the neighbours happy. Your newly adopted cat is more likely to settle in to a contained lifestyle if you keep them at home from the beginning. Kittens generally adapt well to an indoor lifestyle if they have been contained from an early age. Newly-adopted cats should always be contained during the settling-in period anyway, as they may run away or become lost if allowed outside. It's important to take the necessary steps to make sure your new cat or kitten is comfortably transitioned into their new home, as well as making your other pets comfortable with the new addition.

Tips for introducing a cat into your household:



Prepare a safe room

Having a room prepared as your new cat's 'sanctuary' helps to slowly introduce them to their new home. This can be done by:

- Setting up a 'neutral zone' such as a spare bedroom or office, not a place where your existing pets like to spend time. The aim is to make this your new cat's 'core territory'; a place in which they can feel safe and belongs to them. Ideally, it should have a view to outside, and sunny places for sunbathing.
- Providing comfortable bedding, boxes, blankets, a scratching post and some places for your new cat to hide. Cats love to find small dark spaces to hide when they need to feel safe.
- Putting a piece of your clothing in the room so your cat can get used to your scent and feel comfortable around you.
- Having water, food and a litter tray in the room (not placed too close together). If you already have a cat, purchase an additional litter tray so that you have one tray per cat plus one extra.
- Giving them some of their own new toys to play with. Do not give them another pet's toys as they will smell like them.
- Making the room safe to play in. Tie up loose cords and remove fragile or toxic items.
- Consider buying a pheromone spray or diffuser (available from your vet or pet stores). This synthetic form of cat pheromones can help to calm cats. This unique scent that only cats can smell, helps them to feel at ease in their environment.



The ride home

A carrier box with a removable door and removable top half is the best way to safely transport your new cat or kitten. Your cat can then be placed gently onto the floor of the carrier, without having to be forced into the front opening.

Make sure your cat is secure in their carrier, with a blanket for comfort, and go straight home to make the process quick and comfortable for your cat.

If possible, include a blanket or toy, with smells from their old home, to help make the transition easier.



When you first arrive home

- Put the cat carrier in their safe room, open the carrier, and let your cat leave the carrier when they feel ready.
- Let your cat settle in and explore their room.
- Don't allow other pets to enter the safe room, but slowly and quietly introduce other humans of the household without overwhelming or scaring your new cat with too much energy.
- Put a sign on the door, or lock it if necessary, to prevent other people from entering the area and letting your cat escape.
- Make sure you have enough time to gently play and interact with your new cat, without upsetting the routines of your existing pets.



Slowly introduce your new cat to the rest of the house

Depending on your cat, the settling-in period may vary from several days to several weeks.

Once your cat is feeling comfortable with you in the safe room, and if you don't have any other pets, you can slowly start to let your cat explore more areas of the house.

Close doors to other rooms so they can slowly learn the house and not get too overwhelmed. Over time you can open other doors and introduce your cat to the rest of the house.



Introducing your new cat to another cat

This can be a challenging task. Cats can be very territorial, but when done right, your cats may soon become good friends or at least tolerate each other.

- Do not introduce the cats to each other on arrival.
- It is best to put your existing cat in a separate room while you take your new cat to their safe room.
- Once your new cat is comfortable with you and their new room, you can slowly start to introduce your cats to each other. This can be done by interchanging the cats' bedding so they can get used to each other's scent and the idea of sharing.
- Introductions can then happen in a variety of ways, and this will depend on your cats. Most adult cats are quite tolerant of kittens. They can be introduced when they are eating or playing, providing there is plenty of space.
- Introductions should occur at a calm time of day. Bring your new cat into the living room in a cat carrier and place the carrier on a bench. This allows your cats to exchange smells and observe each other, and prevents them from challenging each other by staring at one another.
- Keep introductions brief, 5-minute sessions several times a day are better than a long stressful encounter.
- Help make the experience positive by stroking, talking and feeding your cats delicious treats. If there is any aggression, separate them and reattempt later when everyone is calm.
- Feeding and petting in the same room can gradually take place without the carrier as they learn to associate good things with each other's presence. This could take hours to weeks.
- Watch signals closely. Subtle signs of discomfort and fear from cats include a direct stare, a raised bottom and tail, crouching low, and fluffed up hair.



Introducing your new cat to your dog

- Follow the same steps as previously described when introducing a new cat to a dog.
- When it's time for the official meeting, exercise your dog prior and spend ten minutes or so with your new cat.
- Allow for initial introductions with your cat in their carrier, and your dog on their lead. Then allow your cat to wander around the room and bring your dog in on their lead.
- Distract your dog from your cat by using a toy or treats and help your cat understand your dog is not a threat.
- Signs of discomfort from dogs include raised hackles, staring, snarling and stalking.
- As your cat and dog start to feel comfortable with each other, let them relax and do their own thing, under supervision. Your dog may still need to have the leash attached, but not held, so you can interrupt any chasing. This transition could take hours to weeks.
- Give your cat an escape route. This can be a high perch to climb or a baby gate they can pass through for safety.
- Never leave your new cat and dog in a room together until you completely trust them both.



Introducing a new cat to children

Kids can be excitable, energetic and hands-on, and quite scary to some cats. It's important to discuss with your children that they need to be gentle and calm around your new cat.

- Allow your cat to make the first interaction. It is important not to force them to sit on your child's lap or allow your kids to chase them.
- Always supervise children playing with cats. Cats can get overstimulated with too much high-energy play and can scratch and bite as a result. Encourage children to have short bursts of play using wand-toys or throwing toys/balls, in between periods of calm.
- Teach children that when cats are sleeping, grooming, eating or toileting, they should be left alone.





When things get challenging

Pets can become great friends and companions for each other, but this can take time and patience while the relationship develops.

Fighting over access to valued things such as sleeping areas, human attention and food is the most common cause for poor relationships between pets.

- Keep routine times for one-on-one play so no one feels left out.
- Remove competition between pets. Cats like their own stuff and often don't like to share.
- Provide each pet with lots of choices of resting places, toys, food and water bowls, and litter boxes.
- Make sure there are lots of hiding places, plenty of vertical space and eliminate any areas where cats can be ambushed with no escape.

If your pets do fight:

- Don't try to break up a fight between pets by getting in the middle of it.
- Try to distract your pets from fighting by clapping your hands and using your voice to make high pitched sounds.
- If safe to do so, place a barrier between your pets, such as a large piece of stiff cardboard or a blanket.
- Separate your pets from each other to calm down, and then carefully reintroduce them in a day or two.

A final word

Be patient and observant, and you will be rewarded.

Ultimately if you let your pets set their own pace, and not force contact between them, they will establish their own social system.

Sometimes cats are content to just share their space with another but won't become close friends as you may have hoped.

The good news is that with the right attention, most cats will make themselves truly at home with the rest of your family.



If you are having ongoing trouble settling a new cat into your household, seek professional advice from your vet or a cat behaviour consultant.



For more info visit: www.tassiecat.com

Thanks to Dr Katrina Ward for the great information on integrating your new pet cat into your household.

