

## Before You Introduce...

By Mickey Niego

A carefully planned introduction is everything. Most cats do not readily accept a new member of the family; they need time to get used to the idea. A certain amount of hissing, posturing and chasing is to be expected. It is important to have patience and not rush things along. Don't chance an all out fight; when in doubt, wait a few more days before proceeding to the next step. Preventing a problem is easier than solving one.

Several factors need to be considered and balanced in a planned introduction; among them age, size, sexual maturity, personality. Experience matters. A stray will be competitive, territorial and stand up for himself. An orphaned hand raised kitten may grow up to be an awkward and fearful adult; when it comes to living with another cat, this type of cat commonly is unable to make the adjustment. As the situation deviates from the ideal, the introduction process becomes protracted.

The period of adjustment and creation of a new routine can stretch beyond the normal 6 to 12 weeks. If enough factors are in conflict, the cats will become adversaries rather than friends.

If this were an ideal world the New cat (N-cat) would be younger and smaller than the Existing cat (E-cat). N-cat would be of the opposite sex, sexually immature or neutered. His personality would compliment that of the E-cat. You would take your time interviewing all candidates and would be rational, not emotional during the decision-making process.

The reality is that many times choice is not an option. Roommates, lovers and spouses with cats come as a basic non-negotiable package deal; the humans agreed to cohabitate, the cats will have to manage. This type of introduction can be rough. Be prepared for a prolonged introduction; especially if the cats have lived alone since kittenhood and have no experience living with another cat.

Finding a stray on the street or falling in love at the shelter is another one of those unplanned events that can deliver a jolt to both you and your E-cat. Should you take him home just because fate put him in your path? A cat from the shelter or a rescued stray must be physically isolated from your E-cat for 10 days to 2 weeks to make certain that he is not incubating a contagious disease. A cat with an unknown background must be thoroughly examined for parasites and disease, leukemia tested, and vaccinated by a veterinarian before he can come into contact with E-cat.

### **The Isolation Area**

All introductions start with the same basic rules. The newcomer, N-cat, will be isolated. The existing cat, E-cat, will have the run of the house except for the area designated as N-cat's isolation area. The isolation area should be a room with a door that can be closed so there is absolutely no contact between the newcomer and the existing cat. You must be able to provide this type of space if N-cat is a shelter cat or a stray.

If the cat's health record is known and space is severely limited, a large cattery or kennel cage with a blanket over it will suffice.

If you don't have a spare room, your bedroom or bathroom can be set up as the isolation room. If your cat is used to sleeping with you, you may have to use the bathroom. Remember, E-cat should be inconvenienced as little as possible; suddenly denying E-cat this basic level of companionship will complicate the situation.

If you're left with no choice, except the bathroom, and E-cat's litter box is currently located there, move the box to a new spot or create one with a privacy screen. If circumstances permit, do this at least two weeks before bringing the newcomer home. Planning ahead will minimize the chaos for E-cat.

The isolation area should be cat proofed and well ventilated. The simple set-up should include a litter box, a water bowl and a cave-like hiding box lined with something comfortable. Be sure to spend quality time with E-cat. Talk to him; tell him that although things are not the way they used to be, he is still special. Play his favorite games. Groom him daily. Give him little bits of something yummy by hand. Make it intimate.

### **Step Two**

Now that E-cat is accustomed to the newcomers' limited existence, it's time to move forward. The next step will allow them to see each other without full body contact. Stack two 36" high tension gates in the newcomers doorway. Rigid plastic mesh baby gates are available at most children's specialty or department stores. If you have reason to believe that either cat will get over the 6' gate set-up, use PLAN B. It is very important that the cats not fight. PLAN B: jam the door of the isolation room with two hard rubber door stops, one on each side with the door cracked open 2 to 3 inches. Make sure that neither cat fit his head through the opening. Check that the door is secure and will not suddenly pop open or slam shut if a cat body slams the door aggressively. They will be able to touch noses, whack each other with their paws and investigate without full body contact. When you are not at home or unable to at least peripherally supervise, close the door. Do not proceed to the final step until the cats seem relatively calm in each others presence; hissing, posturing and growling should be at a bare minimum.

### **Step Three**

Finally, you get to open the door! With E-cat occupied elsewhere, take down the gates or open the door. Don't make a big thing out of it. Let the cats happen upon each other. Stay on the sidelines; don't interfere. E-cat may stalk and chase the newcomer; this is typical territorial behavior. The newcomer may do the same if E-cat enters the isolation room. Do not leave them unsupervised.

If a cat fight erupts keep your hands out of it. Do not attempt to handle or pick up either cat. Clap hands and shout, bang a pot with a spoon, throw water, anything to startle them, but don't ever reach into a tangled mass of fighting cats. It always sounds much worse than it is. Cats yowl and scream, but if their nails have been trimmed prior to the EVENT, damage should be minimal. Declawed cats have no alternative except to bite. When things have cooled down considerably, go over each of their bodies carefully checking for damage. Bites and punctures wounds can become infected and abscess. Call your vet if you suspect that an abscess is forming.

The complete process can take anywhere from several days (kitten to kitten/juvenile) to several months (adult stray to adult prima dona); a lot depends on how far you deviated from the IDEAL. You must watch for signs of stress. Eating food quickly and then vomiting, excessive grooming, sleeping and/or drinking are signs that someone is not happy. Spraying, indiscriminate urination and defecation, mewling and hiding behaviors are also associated with anxiety and stress.

Do not promote competition. Continue to feed in separate areas. Maintain the two litterboxes. Many E-cats have been known to block doorways and deny access to box or bowl. Don't be in a hurry to consolidate. If a cat can't get to his box, he will be left with no choice except to create a new toilet area!

Eventually, hostilities will decline. E-cat will stop the chasing and stalking and the newcomer will stop perching and scurrying along the edges of the room. They'll declare a cease fire. They will start to groom each other and share sleeping spots. At worst, you will have peaceful coexistence and mutual respect. Hopefully, they will become best buddies.

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