



Foster Parent

Cat-Dog Introductions and Integration

Before We Begin...

This is meant as a general guideline. Every animal, person, and home is unique; inevitably, unique questions or scenarios arise from time to time. If there are any conflicting extenuating circumstances, you run into challenges along the way, or if an animal or person is injured while working toward integration, please reach out for help!

Misconceptions vs. Reality

Misconception: *A dog who chases squirrels, rabbits, or other critters is going to show predatory behavior toward cats in the home.*

Reality: While this can be true for some dogs, many dogs who chase critters or even other cats *outside* are able to integrate successfully with cats *inside*. Behavior can vary based on environment, the individuals involved, if the dog's on a leash, the circumstances of their introductions, and a number of other variables.

Misconception: *Chasing a cat is always aggressive/predatory behavior.*

Reality: Not all chase is aggressive. Dogs & cats both chase for a number of reasons, including play, excitement, when startled, or simply because whoever they're chasing started running first. Some individuals (cats & dogs) may even instigate a game of chase because they have fun *being* chased. (We'll talk about some safety considerations even in cases of play further down.)

Misconception: *A dog putting their mouth on a cat is always aggressive/predatory.*

Reality: Many, many dogs will use their mouths to communicate in non-predatory/non-aggressive ways. Some dogs use their mouths to play, some may put their mouth on an individual if they are uncomfortable and asking for space, etc. If there are no injuries, especially in a situation where the dog *could* have easily escalated to an injury (and in most cases a medium or large dog could have if they had their mouth on the cat), then it's likely the dog's intention was not to injure.

Misconception: *The dog needs to see the cat as the "boss" or "alpha".*

Reality: Not only is it unfair to expect a cat to fill a social role they're not wired for and can't learn to navigate, but the idea that dogs need or should have a "strong, dominant alpha" is itself a myth!

Misconception: *Hissing, scratching, barking, growling, and snapping are signs of aggression.*

Reality: All of these are forms of communication. Just like shouting when we're upset or overwhelmed doesn't automatically equate to hating that person, natural communication like the examples above don't necessarily mean there's no chance of long-term success for a dog & cat.

While these behaviors and other signs of stress, overstimulation, etc. may not inherently indicate all hope is lost, they may be signs that integration is moving too quickly for the individual(s). **Look at these behaviors as your sign to take a step back, slow the process down, and/or reassess.**

When in doubt, reach out for help!

Take Your Time

Even in cases where the cat has lived with other dogs and the dog has lived with other cats, bringing a new animal into the home is a big change. Even the resident pet often needs some time to adjust, and for the new pet, their whole world has just changed (for the better, but it's a lot nevertheless!) Although the process outlined may seem and feel tedious at times, the best chance for everyone to be successful is to **take it slow**. Oftentimes, going too quickly and overwhelming one or more animals is going to end up adding more time in the long-run as we now have to work back toward any progress that may have been lost. A month or two may seem like a long time right now, but remember, the goal we're aiming for is years of a safe, happy household with both!

Setting Up Success

Tips for Cats

- Designate a space(s) in your home as a dog-free zone. Within this zone, your cat should have access to litter, food, water, toys, high perches, and safe hiding places. This zone should be **physically inaccessible** to the dog. This will be easy at first since we'll want a closed door somewhere between the two to begin with, but as we progress with integration, we need to be able to reinforce those boundaries and prevent the dog from disrupting the cats' safety zone. Tall baby gates are a common option, and they can even be set up from the start while the doors are closed. Here are some additional baby gate tips:
 - If you have the option to use the hardware mounts, this will be your best bet to prevent a dog from knocking the gate over.
 - Even if you never see your dog try to jump or knock over the gate, it's best to crate them and/or put them in a separate room behind a closed door when left home alone. We don't want them testing the waters because of unsupervised boredom!
 - If your cat is unable or unwilling to jump the gate, there are versions that include a small pet door inside the bigger door. This will still give them the freedom to come & go while still keeping the dog out. (For smaller dogs, a regular height gate may work as long as the pup can't jump over it and the cats can.)
- In addition to having high perches in the dog-free zone, having vertical escape routes in other areas of the home (e.g. living room, bedroom, etc.) is also highly recommended. Vertical spaces provide a safe vantage point most cats will be naturally inclined to utilize.
- Keep your kitty's nails trimmed in case they defend themselves with a swat at the dog. Even if the cat is communicating appropriately that they need space, we want to mitigate potential injuries to the dog—both for safety and so the dog won't associate the cat with pain.

Tips for Dogs

- Keep a lightweight leash attached to their collar that they can drag around **at all times** until everyone is well settled with their new roomies. (If you use a different leash for walks, you can take the drag leash off *after* the walking leash is secured, and vice versa after the walk.) Even when there is a physical barrier such as a door separating the dog & cat, this drag leash is going to be a useful tool to prevent bolting (or make catching them easier if they do slip past you), and leading them away from a door/area if they are overly fixated.
- If your dog has known door-darting tendencies, you see this type of behavior, or you want to proactively play it extra safe, set up an airlock system. An airlock system consists of two barriers (e.g. any combination of secure doors, gates, pens, crates, etc.) where **only one is open at a time**. One thing I have found helpful when getting used to an airlock system is to put up signs on each door/gate inside the airlock, e.g. "Remember to close the gate tightly before opening the door!"



Tips for Both

- Identify some “high value” treats for each (i.e. treats they really, *really* like) and keep them in stock! Most dogs & cats prefer soft treats heavy with scent. For cats, this scent (or treat) may be tuna or chicken. (A lot of cats love [Churu's](#)!) For dogs, some good options are often chicken, cheese, hot dogs, and dried liver.
- **We don't determine the pace of this process; their behavior does.** Even a chill, dog-savvy cat should be kept separated from an overly excited pup until that pup is able to settle down and can be redirected. Likewise, even a laid back, cat-social dog should be kept separated from an anxious cat who's still getting used to the smells and noises of the dog.
- If the new cat or dog is in a foster home before your home, ask the foster to help with scent swaps! This just means putting an old towel, shirt, etc. in the animals' favorite napping spot and exchanging the articles a couple days before bringing the new addition home. This gives both animals a chance to investigate the scent of the other without added stimulation.
- After the first few days or week, find opportunities to give the new pet time to investigate more of the home without the resident animal(s) hanging around. This may mean temporarily closing resident cats in the dog-free zone; or the resident dog going for a walk, play date, daycare, puppuccino run, etc. while someone is home with the new cat exploring.
- Both cats & dogs often benefit from routine. This transition is going to upend quite a bit inevitably, but try to stick to a general daily routine as much as possible.

Language Barriers

Cats & dogs are often going to look, smell, sound, and behave wildly different to one another than what they're used to from either their own species or us humans. A dog may not realize hissing or even a swat means “back off”. A cat won't necessarily understand a big floppy play bow and a wagging tail is an invitation to play.

While we want healthy communication between the two in the long run, we humans may need to act as “interpreters” and “referees” to some degree when first integrating cats & dogs. To ensure we're not deterring positive or even neutral interactions, it can help to familiarize ourselves with typical body language each species exhibits. Here are some resources to help!

- [Cat body language by Lili Chin](#)
- [Cat Body Language 101](#)
- [Fear, Anxiety, and Stress Spectrum - Cats \(PDF download\)](#)
- [Dog Body Language 101](#)
- [Fear, Anxiety, and Stress Spectrum - Dogs \(PDF download\)](#)

Stages of Introduction & Integration

Assume each of these stages will take *at least* 1-2 weeks, and may take longer depending on the individual animals' progress. Tip: Some of these steps may be easier with two people, but this is not required.

Stage 1:

- There should be at least one **physical & visual barrier** between the dog & cat at all times. Ideally, we want to minimize how much we're changing the established animal's environment & routine. This will often mean limiting the new animal's "free run" of the home for the first couple of weeks. As long as they're getting plenty of physical exercise, mental stimulation, and social time with the human(s) in the home, limiting their space to a single room short-term is in no way cruel. They may struggle to adjust and acclimate, but that can just as easily be the case if they have the run of the place (and sometimes having a bigger space can be even more overwhelming).
- Dogs' & cats' best sense is their sense of smell, and we can use this! Leave an old towel, sheet, etc. in each of the animals' favorite sleeping spots (or, if you are crating the dog at night and/or during the day, you can also put it here). After a day or two, move the items so the cat & dog have access to a strong scent of one another they can investigate and get familiar with at their own pace. Put it somewhere obvious and easy to access. This scent swap can be repeated every couple of days.
- Provide calm praise & reward to either animal when they show curious/nonreactive interest in the scented item and/or around the separating door.
- Practice calling the dog away from the door when they're investigating. Even if the dog is relaxed and does not appear heavily fixated, this is still good practice. Give the dog a few seconds to sniff around, then cheerfully get their attention and encourage them over to you (which should be rewarded!)
- Be sure to secure the cat in another room before taking the dog out/bringing the dog inside (and vice versa if your cat spends time outside, in a catio, etc.)
- Secure a tall gate or pen in the threshold of the separating door and give the animals at least a day or two to check it out with the door still closed before moving on to Stage 2. (The gate/pen can even be set up at the very beginning of Stage 1.)

IMPORTANT

If you are bringing a new dog into a home where there is *also* an established dog(s), keep the established dog(s) separated during the exercises outlined in Stages 2 & 3, and for *at least* the first few days of Stage 4 (especially anytime the leash is being held). We want to avoid overstimulating or overwhelming any of the animals.

Additionally, being on leash can cause frustration, especially if the dogs try to interact with each other, and a frustrated dog could be distressing to the cat even if indirect and at a distance

Stage 2

- Pocket some treats for the pup and walk them past the open door on a **loose leash** with the gate/pen still providing a physical barrier. Everyone is allowed to look and show curious interest, and as long as the dog isn't pulling really hard, making a bunch of noise, etc. upon seeing the cat, offer calm praise and reward, but keep moving at a casual, steady pace. The first time you do this exercise, just do it once. Even if everything goes perfectly, we don't want to overwhelm anyone!
 - If a second person is available, have them in the room with the cat and toss treats to the cat when the dog is walked by.
- Do this exercise a few times throughout the day. If you continue to see calm, relaxed behavior from everyone for 2-3 rounds, add one or two additional pass-bys the next time.
- Toward the end of Stage 2, once the dog is able to do several consecutive pass-bys in a relaxed manner without getting overexcited, fixated, etc. you can stop parallel with the gate and allow the dog to sniff. **Do not coax** either animal toward the gate; allow them to approach at their own personal comfort level. If after several seconds one or neither animal approaches, that's okay! It may take time to build confidence, and we can't rush that.
- **Allow reasonable, natural communication.** Don't reprimand barking, growling, hissing, etc. and try to keep the leash loose throughout.
 - If the dog vocalizes in a playful manner, let the cat's reaction dictate what feedback (if any) you give the dog. Not all cats are going to be put off by a playful dog!

- If the cat exhibits nervous/defensive/"give me space" behavior (e.g. hissing, ears folded back flat, etc.), even if the dog is behaving calmly toward the cat, calmly encourage the pup away and reward for moving away.
- If the dog reacts in an unfriendly or ambiguous manner, try to calmly coax them away first without tightening the leash. If you are able to do this successfully, reward! If you do need to apply pressure on the leash to move them away, try to remain calm and keep the leash a fixed length with your hand held at your side as you walk away. This way, *as soon as* the dog stops trying to pull toward the cat, the pressure on their collar will immediately go away (signaling to them it's much more comfortable to *not* pull toward the cat).
- If you have a second person available to be in the cat's space, they can also coax the cat to move away and to a high spot (e.g. cat tree) if the cat is showing signs of fear, discomfort, etc. but struggling to disengage on their own.
- If either animal is heavily reactive at the gate at any point during Stage 2, try starting off with more distance from the gate. When they are relaxed, gradually close that distance bit by bit over multiple sessions. Be sure not to get closer until **both** animals are able to see the other, not react, and remain **relaxed**. It can also help to practice basic obedience skills, tricks, etc. as a way of giving the dog something else to focus on while still being aware of the cat (just not fixating on the cat).
- **NOTE:** If the pup becomes worked up for any reasons (excitement or otherwise), they will be less likely to respond to basic obedience cues, even if they otherwise know those cues. This is like trying to take an exam while someone is playing really loud music in the next room; it's not a personal failing, just much harder to do with the added distraction. If you try cuing a skill and your dog seems unresponsive, their brains are most likely just overwhelmed and we need to defuse the situation and their excitement first.

Stage 3

- Once we see consistently relaxed behavior from the animals on both sides of the gate, we can repeat similar exercises without it before transitioning into the main living area. Be sure to give the cat plenty of space when walking the dog into the living area to avoid the cat feeling "cornered" by accident.
- Keep this time out together short to start, separate calmly, and give both plenty of snacks to reward appropriate behavior. Even no interactions (or reactions) and just seeing one another is a good choice for them to make!

Stage 4

- When the dog & cat are both at a point where they are consistently friendly, relaxed, and/or indifferent when near one another in the same room, then we may be ready to start allowing them loose in the same room. When first starting off, we can start with the same exercise in Stage 3, and when everyone seems comfortable and relaxed around each other (direct interaction is not required), you can drop the leash and leave it on as a drag leash.
- As with the previous stages, start with short intervals. Your dog may not even realize they're "off leash". That's okay! Don't encourage them to investigate the cat, but feel free to step away, sit down, etc. (This will likely clue the dog into the fact that the leash is no longer being held.)
- We strongly recommend keeping the drag leash on for *at least* the first two weeks that the animals are allowed loose in the home together as a precaution. Even without concerns of aggressive behavior, their newfound freedom with one another may be a bit too exciting and/or overwhelming at first, and having the drag leash will make it easier to slow things down and separate to settle down.
- If the dog & cat seem to enjoy playing chase, wrestling, etc. it's important to make sure the interaction is mutual. If one of them seems to be instigating more than the other, calmly coax them away from one another, and see if the other one will go back to the original instigator to solicit more play. It's also important to ensure both parties are listening if the other expresses stress, a desire for a break/space, etc. and humans are helping to give the animals a break if someone is missing the signals.
- It's generally a good idea to crate (or otherwise physically separate) the dog when the animals are unattended, even after successful integration. While this is recommended for dogs of all sizes & ages who share a home with cats, this precaution is strongly encouraged with medium and large

dogs where there is a significant size difference, and/or puppies who may still be learning their own size and strength, where even accidents could cause unintentional injury.

Additional Tips

- **Don't hold your cat** when introducing the animals to one another. While we all understand the desire to be protective, holding your cat could unintentionally cause them to feel more at risk since they don't have the ability to get away on their own. This could result in the cat scratching you, and/or the dog jumping up in excitement and hurting you and/or the cat by mistake.
- **Keep the leash loose.** At any point that you are holding a leash during the introduction process, don't shorten it up to force the dog close to you. This could result in increased frustration, stress, etc. Keeping tension on the leash (and by extension the dog's collar) when meeting a cat or any other animal/person is like trying to meet someone while another person is twisting your shirt collar tight. Even if it doesn't necessarily hurt, that tension could make you nervous and put you on edge. The same can be true for dogs and leash pressure.
- If your dog gets excited or nervous anytime you leash them up or pick up their drag leash, practice this randomly throughout **Stage 1**. If this excites the dog, just make it as boring as possible, then drop the leash and carry on with your day. If this makes your dog nervous, we still don't want to make it a big deal, but we can toss treats when picking up the leash.

What Next?

Even after successful integration, certain actions/behaviors could trigger excitement and/or nervousness from one or both animals. This does not automatically mean all your hard work and success was for nothing. Sometimes new situations are just exciting, nerve-wracking, and/or trigger instinctive behaviors that are not necessarily paired with harmful intent. For example:

- Picking up the cat may be new for the dog. It also takes away the cat's autonomy to protect itself, which could cause a fearful response if the dog comes to investigate (even calmly).
- The dog may have an instinctive reaction to chase even after they are familiar with the cat. Some dogs do this with people & dogs too, and while it may frighten the cat and ultimately be a behavior you want to prevent & discourage, it doesn't mean their hard-won relationship is ruined. Give them some time to decompress after all that excitement and reevaluate. It may help to teach your dog skills that can help stop and/or redirect them.
- Remember: leashes, barriers, and confined spaces can cause reactivity even among otherwise social animals and between friends. For example, if one or either reacts when in an enclosed space such as a crate/carrier, it may be they feel threatened or frustrated. Help them out by separating the animals in different rooms when one is crated.
- Most dogs aren't very good at making generalizations. Integrating with a cat indoors doesn't mean they won't react differently to a cat outdoors, a new cat in the home, or even the same cat in a different environment. Take new scenarios slowly, and have treats on hand to reward appropriate behavior (even the unexciting ones!)

Ask for Help!

If you have questions or concerns, or an incident occurs, please reach out to the foster team. Please include the Animal ID number in your email.

Foster team email- Fosterpets@HCFLGov.net

Rescue/foster department phone- 813-272-1157