

Keeping the Peace Between Your Dog and Cat

They're as different as human siblings, but with your help, felines and canines can accept each other—and even become friends.

by JENNA WIRTH



One craves praise.
The other needs
to know that there's
an escape route.



WE'VE ALL HEARD the adage that cats and dogs fight like—well, you know. But there are exceptions to this supposed law of nature. As many people in feline-plus-canine households will tell you, these very different animals can coexist peacefully. The trick is to ease their getting-to-know-you transition, taking steps to ensure that Sparky and Binx live happily together for years to come.

“Dogs and cats can learn to speak each other’s language if you give them the opportunity to do so safely and calmly,” says Matthew McCarthy, D.V.M., founder and medical director of Juniper Valley Animal Hospital, in Middle Village, New York. “They can come to respect each other and to read the signs for when it’s playtime and when it’s not.” If your family is ready to mix species, petwise, we can help guide you through the process.

Train Your Dog First

Sorry, pup, but a lot of this transition is on you. Teaching your dog basic commands like “sit,” “stay,” “come,” and “drop” serves as a safety measure in multi-pet households. “A dog’s lack of impulse control can result in its chasing or nipping at a cat,” says Michelle Burch, D.V.M., a veterinary writer and adviser for Catological.com. Help your dog control its natural inclination to chase, and it’ll remain calmer when a kitty tail flashes by.

“Training can help dogs understand what’s appropriate to chase and what isn’t, and gives you tools to distract them if a problem does occur,” says Georgina Phillips, D.V.M., a veterinary writer and advisor for the feline-care blog BetterWithCats.net.

It’s also crucial to give dogs regular exercise so they can relax at home. In the same way that kids are more easygoing after being tucked out by physical activity, dogs need recess to help them chill. “Dogs have to get their energy out somewhere,” Dr. Phillips says. “A vigorous walk around the neighborhood or playtime with your children can be a great way for them to burn off extra energy. It’s especially important before a dog meets a new cat for the first time.”

Give Your Cat Its Own Territory

Cats are legendary for being independent, and they will benefit from a comfy spot the dog can’t access. “Most cats feel safest when their perch is higher than the dog can reach,” Dr. Burch says. “A cat has a good view of its environment in elevated locations and can eliminate attacks from behind.” A kitty tower can be a cat’s sanctuary, and you might also consider strategically placing furniture so your cat can walk from the back of the couch to a table, shelf, or windowsill.

If a cat has escape routes, any altercations will likely end quickly. “Without a safe and easy way of running away, cats may be left with only the fight response, which can lead to big problems,” Dr. Phillips says. You can also cut a kitty-size opening in a closet door or the door to your basement so your cat has a hideout, or put up a baby gate to make a room off-limits to the dog, Dr. McCarthy suggests.

The most important safe space for cats is their litter box, since they need a sense of privacy and security for their bathroom breaks. “The cat may develop an aversion to the litter box if the dog is constantly approaching when the cat is trying to do its business,” Dr. McCarthy

says. “This can lead to urinating outside the litter box or other inappropriate behavior.” Keep the box gated off or behind a kitty door.

One last tip: Make sure to keep kitty nails trimmed. To communicate their boundaries, cats will use not only vocalizations like hissing but also their paws and claws. “Their nails are their first line of defense when they feel threatened,” Dr. Burch notes. “Since cat nails grow sharp and easily puncture skin, trimming them routinely will help prevent injury to your dog.” (Not to mention your kids.) As a side note, teach children that if the dog has upset the cat, that’s not a time to offer the kitty reassuring pets or hugs. Let the cat calm down on its own. Show your kids how to watch for the cat’s tail to de-puff, for instance, before approaching.

Baby Them Both

It’s important that you and your kids spend quality time with each pet separately, Dr. Burch says. “Animals who feel neglected can become destructive, territorial, or aggressive.” If the dog or cat is hanging out in your child’s room, suggest that your kiddo shut their door for a bit to enjoy peaceful together time without the other pet prancing in.

“Dogs and cats can be especially territorial about their food, so serve their meals in separate bowls,” Dr. McCarthy says. Otherwise, dogs tend to sample the cat kibble. “Since cats can use vertical space, put their bowls up off the floor, if possible,” Dr. McCarthy adds. Most pets are fine with eating meals at the same time, as long as the dog stays out of the cat’s way. But if your cat is especially skittish, consider giving it a separate feeding time in a quiet place.

Finally, separating toys and beds will also help prevent possessive aggression, Dr. Burch says. After you show them that they have their own special spots and plenty of family attention, don’t be surprised if you find them curled up together one day, acting as if it’s the most natural thing in the world. ☺