

## PROTOCOL FOR THE INTRODUCTION OF A NEW PET TO OTHER HOUSEHOLD PETS

This handout has a tick sheet at the end that summarizes the main points. If you are an experienced pet person, you may not need to read the entire handout in detail if the tick sheet makes sense to you. If you have questions, the answers are likely in the handout.

### Adjustment and Transition

When you first bring home a new pet, expect a period of transition and adjustment for the other pets in the household. You may find that some of your pets hide from the new addition, while others might try to push him around. Sometimes, the original pets will start to do behaviors designed to get your attention, including barking, pawing, stealing items, or pushing the new addition out of the way and jumping all over you. Cats may mark with urine, feces, or their claws. All of these behaviors can be normal and are not worrisome if they change within a week or two. If you have a younger animal, or one who is going through social maturity, you may find that he “regresses” a bit and reverts to younger behaviors for a short while. He will recover and catch up quickly.

If the animals in the household do not revert to normal within a short time, or if they become aggressive, you have a problem that will not go away on its own. Short, temporary changes in appetite may be normal; not eating or only eating at odd hours or in certain circumstances is not normal. The sooner you seek help from your veterinarian and/or a qualified specialist, the better off you will be.

### Before Introducing the New Pet

Before introducing **any** new pet, make sure she is healthy and up-to-date on **all** relevant vaccinations, make sure that tests for fecal parasites are negative, and that the pet is flea-free. It is particularly important that all new cats are checked for their viral titer (feline immunodeficiency virus [FIV], feline leukemia virus [FeLV]) status. The conventional wisdom is that positive cats should not be brought into negative households.

### Gradual Introductions

You can make the transition easier for new pets by using gradual introductions. This means that, unless it is “love at first sight,” the new pet should be kept separate from the other pets whenever they are not closely supervised. This advice may be a bit extreme, but it is designed to ensure both that no injuries occur and that the social system of the original pets isn’t suddenly fragmented. The original pet or pets should have access to the same areas of the house as previously. If the original dog was crated, the crate can still be used. If access was restricted to the first floor, this pattern should continue to be followed.

The new pet should be placed in a neutral area (e.g., a den, finished basement, or brightly lit bathroom) with toys, a blanket, water, a litterbox if the new pet is a cat, and anything else that she might need. It is important that the new pet **not** be placed **only** in an area that is considered highly desirable by the other pets. Areas of high value usually include places where the people spend a lot of time with the pets (bedrooms)

or where the pets choose to stay when alone (around food dishes, window sills that are good perch sites). If you restrict the new pet to a highly valued and preferred area and exclude the other pets from it, you may be provoking anxieties that accompany rehoming on all sides.

Introduce the new pet gradually. First, spend some time alone with the new pet. Then bring the new pet out on a leash or harness and let the other pets explore her. If you anticipate problems, the other animals can be on leashes or harnesses, too. If you have too many animals to adequately monitor under these circumstances, the new pet can be placed in a crate or cage in the center of a room and the other pets can **sequentially** explore the caged pet. *Please note that you can only place a dog or cat in a cage or crate if he is comfortable in it. If you see any signs of panic or freezing behavior, do not use the enclosure. By doing so, you will cause behavioral harm.* Ensure that if the resident pet is hostile, the new pet cannot feel “trapped” by removing any hostile animal and placing the crate in an area where the crated animal cannot be victimized. Animals newly introduced to other animal households need to have some quiet, secure time.



A commercially available harness and lead for cats that could help facilitate introductions.

### Crates

If you have a dog that is always crated, you can accustom her quickly to a new dog by crating the new dog at a distance where she can be seen by the original dog, but where they cannot directly interact through the crates. As the dogs become more accustomed to each other, their crates can be moved gradually closer together until they are side-by-side.

### “Pet-Proofing” Your Home

Beware that the area in which you are confining the new pet should be “pet proof.” This means that toilet seats should be down, electric cords should be up and put away, sockets should be protected with child-guards, and any valuable or fragile items should be moved. New pets will explore and that exploration should not put them in danger. If the new pet is a very young puppy or kitten you may wish to crate

her for her own protection (see handout on **Protocol for Basic Manners Training and Housetraining for New Dogs and Puppies**). Crates do not afford total protection from willful and determined claws and teeth of an un-crated animal, but they do greatly minimize the risk of damage.

### What About “Recycled” Pets?

Many newly adopted pets are “recycled” pets who are being rehomed. You may have some knowledge of their reasons for rehoming, but it is unlikely that you know all the triggers that will cause such dogs or cats distress. If you try to separate the new pet by placing him in a crate or a separate room and he becomes more distressed, please consider using leads, harnesses, and baby gates, rather than true separations, to control interactions. One of the common problems with recycled pets is panic that is associated with confinements. If the distress is as described, you will not overcome it by repeating the isolation; instead, you will make the animal more anxious. If you note a problem associated with extreme distress or panic, please consult your veterinarian and/or a specialist in veterinary behavioral medicine sooner rather than later.

### Where Might There Be Problems?

Whenever any animal is isolated for any reason, it is critically important that the dog or cat still receives a lot of social attention. “Separate” does not have to mean “deprived.” This is especially true for new pets. When you come home, greet the original pets (ask them to sit and look at you first) and let them out, if this is your normal routine. Do not rush—when people are stressed and rushed they may either facilitate undesirable interactions between the pets or fail to attend to the dog’s or cat’s cues about impending problems.



This set of cat condos built for a rescue group provides for both “separate” and “shared” space use during introductions. Similar solutions may help in homes.

Please remember that the dogs in your household do not live in a true “pack,” nor do the cats live in a true “pride.” In a true pack, new additions are neither abrupt nor adult: puppies are born into groups of known animals and grow knowing them. For the vast majority of humans, this is not a pattern reflected in their canine or feline household, and to expect the resident animals not to react is just not realistic. When we add a new pet, we are disrupting the social structure. Think about it: We bring in an unannounced, unrelated stranger—maybe even an alien species—and expect everyone to be instantly happy. How would most of us react under the same circumstances?

The best times to perform gradual introductions are when the animals are calm. Start by petting the original pets and telling them that it is “okay” **only** if it is truly okay—do not reward hissing, growling, or biting. When you tell a pet it is “okay” when he is upset, you are not calming him down—you are rewarding his inappropriate behavior. If the animals in the household are calm, and either ignore each other or act friendly despite the new addition, you can feed them within sight of the new pet. This distance should be close enough that they can easily see and watch each other, but not so close that they exhibit any signs of distress (e.g., not eating, eating at a faster rate, hissing, growling, snarling, et cetera). Once you find this distance you can move their food dishes closer together by an inch a day until they are side-by-side. If you ever have an aggressive encounter, back off from that distance and return to the last distance where neither pet reacted. Leave the dishes there for a few days and then gradually start to move them again. Feeding and petting the animals in each other’s presence can teach them that good things happen when they are together and calm. This will not happen if either participant reacts violently.

### Problems That Start Between the Old and New Pets Now That a New One Is in the Household

If one animal responds to a gradual introduction with frank and forceful aggression, remove the aggressor to a neutral zone **immediately** and try again when she is calm. It can take anywhere from seconds to hours for the aggressor to calm. When you go to reintroduce the animals again, if the same animal again behaves aggressively in the same manner, separate the animals for the rest of the day or evening, and try later in the day or during the next morning. The separation must ensure that the animals cannot physically interact, and this includes preventing them from staring at each other.

Much posturing involving behaviors associated with aggression—hissing, growling, showing teeth, circling, piloerection (hair lifting on scruff, neck, or back)—is part of a normal way for animals to provoke social systems with other animals to obtain information. You may not like these behaviors, but they can be normal. If this is the only antagonistic type of behavior you witness, just keep calling the animals to you, and when they come, reward them for doing so and again for sitting and being quiet. Chances are animals who behave like this will work it out.

If there is actually physical grabbing and wrestling, call the animals to separate them. If a verbal signal succeeds in separating them, *and* after the antagonistic event the animals do not seem worried about or fearful of each other, *and* no

physical damage was done, don't interfere the next time they interact. Some aggressive and undesirable interactions are not violent, but are still not conducive to the development of a good relationship between the pets.

If, on the other hand, when you try to separate the animals the behaviors intensify, one animal is clearly afraid, or if there is any damage, you have at least one animal exhibiting excessive aggressive behavior. This is the animal with whom you will have to work to gradually accustom the animals to each other.

You can learn to watch for subtle behaviors that can signal potential problems. In dogs, these behaviors include piloerection (hair lifting on scruff, neck, or back), staring, snarling, stalking, side-by-side posturing with growling or lip lifting, and pinning the other animal by grabbing his neck. Watch the recipient of such agonistic encounters. If the recipient is unable to respond to the agonistic individual in a way that decreases the exhibition of potentially threatening behaviors, you may wish to go slowly. You do not want one dog to feel helpless in the presence of another, and some dogs may not read or handle antagonistic signals as well as other dogs.

Cats are masters of subtle threats and their biggest nonvocal threats include a direct stare and an elevation of the rump and base of the tail with or without piloerection. Hissing, snarling, and pouncing are also threats, but are less intimidating to many animals than a direct stare accompanied by an elevated or humped rump. Again, watch for the response of the recipient of the stare. If the recipient of the stare can behave in a way that causes the staring cat to behave in a less-threatening manner, terrific. If you feel that the new cat is losing the contest, is terrified, or is becoming so aggressive she might injure the original pet, separate the animals.



Normal wary behaviors of two rescue kittens who do not know each other while being introduced on "neutral" turf. Note that each cat stares at the other.

When separating animals, please **do not** put your hands or other body parts between the animals! This is the single most common way people are injured by pets. Use cardboard, brooms, blankets thrown over them, loud noises, or, if you are desperate, water (from a hose, bowl, bucket, open a shaken bottle of seltzer) to separate the animals. If you can

identify the aggressor, banish **that** animal to neutral turf. If you cannot identify one aggressor, banish everyone to different pieces of neutral turf.

If the new pet is sitting in close proximity to the other pets and everything seems to be going well, tell all the animals that they are good and give them all small food treats and petting; they like to be petted. This works best if you have two people so one person can hold the new pet while the other deals with the other animals. If you are working with two people, switch roles so that the new pet doesn't just associate her rewards with one person. If you are only one person, this can still be accomplished by using leashes and harnesses and crates. Leashes can be tied to furniture or door knobs that are at a distance that will allow the pets to sniff each other and react, but not permit them to lunge at and injure one another. **Never** leave a tied pet unsupervised even for a minute: an unsupervised, tied dog or cat can strangle and die.

For the entire time that you are doing the above—and it could take hours or weeks—make sure that each pet has 5 to 10 minutes alone with you each day, when all you do is pay attention to that pet. This attention could be grooming, playing with a toy, petting and massage, or just sitting in the grass next to you. Make sure that the pet is happy and relaxed at these times. If you know in advance that you are getting a new pet, you may want to set these periods of individual attention up in advance of the new arrival. If these periods follow a regular schedule the pets will learn to anticipate them. Because they can rely on these set periods, it may decrease their anxiety about the new addition.

Once you are able to get the pets to react to each other in a positive manner, or not to react at all when restrained, take away the restraints. Be vigilant, and be ready to interrupt any dangerous situations. A raised voice, a whistle, or clapped hands will stop most minor skirmishes, but if you need a more forceful stimulus you also need more help.

If the pets are all being good, remember to reward them with praise and treats.

Once you have done the above, you are ready to let the animals out of your sight. Bell the new animal by attaching a bell to her collar so that you and the other animals always know where they are (see Bear Bells at [www.rei.com](http://www.rei.com)). Consider using a breakaway collar that will release if snagged on furniture or grabbed by another animal. Use of a collar and a bell will allow you to spy on any potentially problematic interactions and to interrupt them before they get out of hand. During this period when you are beginning to provide the pets with free access, remember to provide additional water dishes, litterboxes, beds, toys, et cetera, so that you minimize competition and the potential aggressive interaction.

The keys to making this all work are patience and observation. It is critical that the animals are not inadvertently encouraged to become hostile or nervous in each other's presence by well-meant but misplaced reassurance for inappropriate behaviors. Expect that the social system may shift. For example, the dog that *you* always thought of as the "boss dog" may not only be relegated to what *you* perceive as a lower position, but may prefer not having to be the dog who always makes all the decisions. Let your pets set their own pace and forge their own relationships. In many cases the pets never become close companions, but are reasonably content leading separate lives under the same roof. This is far

preferable to frank aggression. Do not push the animals too hard, or push for relationships they clearly do not want; this could backfire and you could undo most of the good you had previously done.

## Problems That Start Between or with the Old Pets Now That a New One Is in the Household

If you have pets who have lived in the same household, but have begun to have some problems with interaction, the above protocol can also help them (for more detailed information for dogs, see **Protocol for Understanding and Treating Dogs with Interdog Aggression** or the **Protocol for Understanding and Treating Feline Aggressions with an Emphasis on Intercat Aggression**). **Regardless, the general rule in managing these situations is to reward the pet who is behaving the most appropriately, given the context.** The pet who is the victim of the aggressive behavior should be fed, walked, and given attention before the aggressor. This will help to reinforce his right to be able to live unmolested.

If confinement of one pet becomes necessary, confine the aggressor in a neutral or lower-quality room. Do not confine the aggressor in the place where she would rather spend her time—this will only convince her that their contest is meritorious.

When you start to reintroduce the pets, do it gradually, as described above. Move from introductions under controlled circumstances to ones where they are being monitored from a distance. Let the animals' behaviors tell you when you are ready to progress. This time, put a bell on the collar of the aggressor. At the first sign of any aggressive behavior, and definitely within 30 to 60 seconds of the *onset of the behavioral progression*, use whatever minimum level of startle or disruption necessary to get the animals' attentions and to abort the interaction. For some animals this will be clearing your throat or calling their name; for others you'll need something more intense (e.g., clapping your hands). This means that you do not wait to interrupt the cat until he has pounced on the kitten, but that you interrupt him as soon as he stares at her. Timing is everything. The disrupted stimulus must be sufficient that the behavior is aborted. At that time reassure the victim, and after everyone has calmed down, engage them both in behaviors that are incompatible with aggression (i.e., feeding and petting). If the aggression persists, banish the aggressor until he is calm, and then try again. If the aggression continues, banish the aggressor until later in the day or the next morning.

## The Concept of Flooding

If the aggression, either between new pets or pets already in the household, continues, someone will likely have recommended a behavioral modification technique called "flooding." You need to think clearly about whether this is something that can be done safely in your household. **In the vast majority of cases, flooding is a terrible, traumatic, and damaging idea.** Because flooding is almost never a good idea, anyone considering it should consult a behavioral specialist to see if

it is even wise to consider using this technique. Flooding can be a last resort in truly exceptional circumstances, but you really must ensure that you are reading the animals' signals correctly or you will do irreparable harm. Remember that flooding is almost always done incorrectly, that it works best in mild, very specific situations, and that it can permanently damage animals. The technique is discussed here only because it's such a commonly—and **wrongly**—recommended panacea.

In flooding, one animal is kept confined or otherwise restrained, while he is reacting inappropriately in the presence of the other animal. He is kept in that restrained or confined situation until the level of the inappropriate reaction diminishes by at least 50%. You must measure the changes in behavioral and physiological reactions before and during the process. Obviously, you could not keep an animal on leash for days on end without respite, but an aggressive animal can be crated for an extended period with food, water, toys, litterbox, if necessary, and a blanket, while the other animal is either locked in a room with him or placed in a similar cage facing him. If one animal is loose, you should know that she could injure the caged animal, or be injured by him, by sticking her paws through the crate. **If the animals become more aggressive and upset, flooding is failing, is counterproductive, doing harm, and should be stopped.**

Honest assessments should render the consideration and use of flooding as the exceptional case. **Do not attempt any flooding methodologies without qualified advice from a specialist.** Other strategies are likely to be much more helpful and successful.

## Medication?

Finally, pharmacological intervention may succeed in helping create a harmonious household where other interventions have failed. There are many newer anxiolytics available, which, when used correctly and prescribed by qualified individuals, may be useful adjuvants to behavioral and environmental modification. In very extreme cases of inter-animal aggression, in which all other therapies, including pharmacological, have failed, the best, kindest, and safest solution may be to place one of the animals in a new home.

## Tick List

- 1. Separate the pets when they are unsupervised.
- 2. Crate one or more of the pets.
- 3. Pet proof the home.
- 4. Gradually introduce the pets using food and rewards.
- 5. Introduce the pets during quiet times using leashes and harnesses.
- 6. Use whistles, water, blankets, et cetera, to interrupt any ongoing and potentially injurious aggression.
- 7. Be familiar with physical signs of impending aggression, and know how to safely interrupt such behavior.
- 8. Bell the new animal when you are ready to introduce her to the household unsupervised.
- 9. **Reward, reward, reward any calm or happy behavior.**
- 10. New home? This will be an exceptional outcome to adding a new animal if the above are done well.