



Shelter

research

8th Edition: 2008

Cats and Dogs Compatibility

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Anyone who works in a shelter soon learns that a key issue in the adoption of a new animal into a home is the potential for compatibility problems. Will my cat get along with a new dog? Will a new cat cope with my pet dogs? Will a new cat upset my old cat? Will my toddlers cope with a new dog, or vice versa?

These concerns can play a significant role in the decision to adopt – or not. There is widespread belief that cats and dogs do not mix because they have vastly different social structures and different modes of communicating. People considering the concurrent adoption of a dog and a cat may think twice for this reason. Similarly, many pet owners are worried that an adoption might upset their existing pets, leading to conflict in the household. And of course, many people are concerned about introducing a pet – particularly a dog – into a home where there are infants or toddlers.

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Owners may not necessarily verbalise these concerns, but the net effect may be fewer animals adopted.

Research has revealed some practical solutions which can reduce these concerns. In short,

- dogs and cats can live together and get along;
- owners can help promote a happy dog-cat relationship; and
- owners can take steps to safely introduce pets into households with children.

A US study of 170 households in which dogs and cats co-existed found that the vast majority (around two thirds) enjoyed a friendly relationship, demonstrated by the initiation of playful interactions (Feuerstein and Terkel, 2008). Around one quarter of dogs and cats were “indifferent” towards one another, with only a small percentage of animals showing aggression towards others in the household (Feuerstein and Terkel, 2008).

Introducing an adopted dog into a household with a resident cat or cats

Introducing an adopted dog into a household where a cat or cats already live may be easier than some owners think. A US study found that dogs’ behaviour towards cats differed depending on whether they had been adopted before or after the cat. Dogs that were adopted second were more likely to be friendly (75%) or indifferent (19%) to cats. However, when adopted first, dogs were friendly in 59% of cases and indifferent in 32% of cases. Therefore, adopting a dog after a cat maximises the chances of them getting along.

The age of the adopted animal also played a significant role. Dogs that were younger than twelve months old when they had their first encounter with a cat were much more likely to have an amicable relationship with the cat, and less likely to be indifferent or aggressive.

Selection of the right dog is important. Dogs with a calm, placid temperament which have been trained by positive-reinforcement are more likely to be relaxed and self-controlled around cats than those that are nervous and highly reactive (Crowell-Davis, 2008). Dogs that have previously lived with cats may accept feline housemates more readily than those who have not.

The initial introduction may set the mood for the future canine-feline relationship. If an initial encounter ends in aggression, that aggression is likely to continue for some time. Owners should not allow a new dog to corner a cat. Aside from terrifying the cat, this behaviour also puts the dog at risk of being scratched on the face – particularly the eye.

It is important for cats to have access to escape routes and a safe haven. As cats are usually better climbers than dogs, tall scratching posts with platforms are ideal, but a readily accessed piece of tall furniture or solid appliance such as a fridge serves the same purpose – as long as it allows the cat to avoid the dog. Alternatively, a toddler-gate that the cat can jump but the dog can’t, may work well (Crowell-Davis, 2008). Elderly or overweight cats that cannot jump the gate may benefit from having the gate raised by about 15-20cm so that the cat can slip under the gate to safety but the dog cannot.

**Sharing this knowledge with owners may
allay their concerns and facilitate adoption
of more animals into loving homes**



Introducing an adopted animal into a household with children

Animals to be adopted into a household with children must be selected carefully. According to one US paper, animals that do best with children have pre-existing skills for living with others, including response to reward-based training, the ability to cope with separation, an absence of food-guarding, being amenable to handling and self control (Bergman and Gaskins, 2008). The study found that 77% of dogs taken to a veterinary behaviourist with a history of biting children had a history of noise-related or separation anxiety (Bergman and Gaskins, 2008). Of course, not all of these traits become evident in a shelter situation, but knowledge of the dog's behaviour allows shelter staff to assist the owners in choosing a particular animal.

Adoptions may be more successful if owners are aware of minor changes they can make to ensure a safe and amicable relationship between pets and other members of the household. As pets and children should never be left unsupervised, owners who introduce a pet into a young family need the ability to separate their pets from people or other animals in the house for short periods of time. Pets that are accustomed to some separation are less likely to become distressed and vocalise, eliminate or engage in destructive behaviour when they do need to be separated from the household (Bergman and Gaskins, 2008).

Feeding pets meals rather than having food available all the time, makes it easier to separate children and pets when food is present. This is important as food-guarding is the most common cause of bites to children (Reisner et al 2007).

Animals made available for adoption should be conditioned to tolerate – and if possible enjoy – handling all over their body, as this prepares them for physical interactions with children (Bergman and Gaskins, 2008).

Dogs in particular may be calmer members of the household if trained by the principle that “nothing in life is free”. This involves giving the pet a simple command such as “sit” or “down” before the pet is allowed to do anything.

Before moving into the household, pets should be introduced to children at a neutral location during a short, fully supervised encounter.

Somewhat surprisingly, dogs and cats are less likely to have problems with infants than they are with toddlers (Bergman and Gaskins, 2008). Most bites of older children occur when the child is patting, hugging or kissing a dog (Reisner et al, 2007). This is why it is important for parents to supervise interactions and encourage gentle and considerate handling of animals by children.

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Conclusion

Studies have shown that dogs, cats and children can not only tolerate one another but can enrich each others lives. Sharing your knowledge about how to increase success of adoption into a multi-species household can help owners plan and manage a successful introduction, while reducing the risk of an aggressive encounter – which can result in an injury to a child or animal.

Shelter staff can use their knowledge about the type of temperament required to integrate into a multi-species household to assess animals, target training programs and guide owners in their choices.

Finally, shelter staff, animals and pet owners can benefit from the knowledge that the presence of an existing pet or child alone is no reason to delay or avoid adoption.

Tips

Where possible, owners wishing to adopt both a dog and a cat should be encouraged to adopt the cat first, to increase the chances of the cat and dog having a friendly relationship.

Adoption success is improved if the adopted animals have already been exposed to other animals or children.

Cats under the age of 6 months and dogs under the age of 12 months are more likely to integrate into a household with existing animals

Adoption success is improved if dogs are able to follow basic commands such as “sit” and “down”

Owners should be advised to introduce new pets to existing pets on neutral territory.

Encourage owners to be patient and calm around their pets.

But remember...

Interactions between animals that differ significantly in size (such as a small cat and a large breed dog, or a small breed dog and a large breed dog) should be supervised even when the animals appear to get along well, as accidents can happen.

Children should never be left unsupervised with animals.

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Editorial

This publication is distributed to every major shelter and pound in Australia. Articles in Shelter Research are written to assist the work of shelters, and information contained therein is obtained from international scientific literature and research.

We welcome your feedback and suggestions:
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The editorial committee of Shelter Research wishes you all a very Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year! Keep up the great work and we'll be back in 2009!



Kate with her dog Archie