

Introducing Cats and Dogs

Cats and dogs can be great pals, but even if the best you can hope for is mutual toleration, there are some important things to remember.

First, dogs are pack animals and cats are not, although cats are far more social than once was thought. The dog's sense of hierarchy can work to your advantage in this situation. Basically, the cats are always higher in status than the dogs. This is essential because of the very simple fact that a dog can kill a cat.

The dog must know that the cat is in charge, and the dog must defer to the cat. Simple things like greeting the cat first when coming home and feeding the cat first establish higher status. Some dogs have high prey drives and there may always be problems with co-existence in these cases.

Kittens are the most vulnerable and there are some very sad families out there, who brought a kitten home and then, through ignorance allowed their dog to kill it. Some people think that this is the dog's fault, but it is not. The dog is operating on a natural instinct. To blame the dog for killing the kitten is like blaming the dog for breathing. However, often this can destroy the family's relationship with the dog. Many people decide to give the dog away or take it to a shelter, and now two lives have been destroyed.

The other way that a cat and especially a kitten may be harmed or killed by a dog is through rough play. Again, it is the owner's responsibility to make sure that play does not get too rough.

So for all these reasons and more, it is important to test the dog around cats and kittens if possible to see how the dog reacts. But even if a dog has tested okay, the introductions still need to be controlled until you are absolutely sure that the dog can be trusted with a cat or kitten.

The dog should be controlled at all times during initial introductions. The dog should be placed in a down-stay position. This works best with two people, but can be accomplished if necessary by one person. The person controlling the dog is positioned beside the dog with a hand ready to grab the collar if the dog should move toward the cat. Keep the dog in a down-stay. Any lunging or snapping is unacceptable and the dog must be told no quite firmly. The cat or kitten needs safe places where it can get away from the dog like perches or hidey holes.

Baby gates that restrict the dog's movements are helpful. Praising the dog for appropriate interactions is essential.

A puppy that has not reliably learned the down-stay command can be introduced to a cat or kitten from behind a baby gate. This allows the cat to have more control of the situation.

Problems situations requiring intervention are: chasing, food protection, toy or chew toy protection, growling, snapping.

Setting ground rules for your dog in relation to the cat will pay big dividends later on and create a harmonious environment for all.