

FELINE SOCIAL BEHAVIOR AND AGGRESSION BETWEEN CATS AND OTHER FAMILY PETS

It's impossible to estimate how well any particular pair or group of cats will ultimately tolerate each other. Some cats are unusually territorial, may never adjust to sharing their house, and may do best in a one-cat family. However, many aggressive problems between cats can be successfully resolved. To do this, the help of both a veterinarian and animal behavior specialist who is knowledgeable in cat behavior may be required. Cats with aggression problems may never be best friends, but can often learn to mutually tolerate each other with a minimum of conflict. Working with aggression problems between family cats will take time and commitment.



Common Types of Aggressive Behaviors between Cats

Territorial Aggression: Cats are very territorial, much more so than dogs. Territorial aggression occurs when Fluffy feels as if his territory has been invaded by an intruder. Depending on where Fluffy spends his time, he may view the entire neighborhood as his territory. Female cats can be just as territorial as males. The behavior patterns in this type of aggression include chasing and ambushing the intruder, as well as hissing and swatting when contact occurs. Territorial problems often occur when a new cat is brought into a household, when a young kitten reaches maturity, or when a cat encounters neighborhood cats outside. It's not uncommon Fluffy to be territorially aggressive toward one cat in a family, and friendly and tolerant to another.

Inter-male Aggression: Adult male cats normally tend to threaten, and sometimes fight with, other males. These behaviors can occur as sexual challenges over a female, or to achieve a relatively high position in the cats' loosely organized social dominance hierarchy. This type of aggression involves much ritualized body posturing, stalking, staring, yowling and howling. Attacks are usually avoided if one cat backs down and walks away. If an attack occurs, the attacker will usually jump forward, directing a bite to the nape of the neck, while the opponent falls to the ground on his back and attempts to bite and scratch the attacker's belly with his hind legs. The cats may roll around biting and screaming, suddenly stop, resume posturing, fight again or walk away. Cats don't usually severely injure one another this way, but the cat should always be inspected for puncture wounds which are prone to infection. Intact males are much more likely to fight in this way than are neutered males.

Defensive Aggression: Defensive aggression occurs when Fluffy attempts to protect himself from an attack he believes he cannot escape. This can occur in response to punishment or the threat of punishment from a person, an attack or attempted attack from another cat, or any time Fluffy feels threatened or afraid. Defensive postures include crouching with the legs pulled in under the body, laying the ears back, tucking the tail, and possibly rolling slightly to the side. This is not the same as the submissive postures dogs show because it's not intended to turn off an attack from another cat. Continuing to approach Fluffy in this posture is likely to precipitate an attack.

Redirected Aggression: This type of aggression is directed toward another animal that didn't initially provoke the behavior. For example, Fluffy is sitting in the window and may see an outdoor cat walk across the front yard. Because Fluffy can't attack the outdoor cat, he may instead turn and attack the other family cat that's sitting next to him in the window. Redirected aggression can be either offensive or defensive in nature.

What to Do

- If Fluffy's behavior changes suddenly, the first step should always be to contact a veterinarian for a thorough health examination. Cats often hide symptoms of illness until they're seriously ill. Any change in behavior may be an early indication of a medical problem.
- Spay or neuter any intact pets in the home. The behavior of one intact animal can affect all pets.
- Start the slow introduction process over from the beginning. Professional help from an animal behavior specialist may be required to successfully implement these techniques.
- In extreme cases, consult with a veterinarian about medicating Fluffy while working with him on a behavior modification program. A veterinarian is the only person who is licensed and qualified to prescribe any medication for Fluffy. Don't attempt to give Fluffy any over-the-counter or prescription medication without consulting with a veterinarian. Animals don't respond to drugs the same way people do, and a medication which may be safe for a human could be fatal to an animal. Keep in mind that medication by itself, isn't a permanent solution, and should only be used in conjunction with behavior modification.

What Not to Do

- If Fluffy is fighting with other cats, don't allow the fights to continue. Because cats are so territorial, and because they don't establish firm dominance hierarchies, they won't be able to work things out as dogs sometimes do. The more often cats fight, the worse the problem is likely to become. To stop a fight in progress, make a loud noise, such as blowing a whistle, squirting the cats with water, or throwing something soft at them. Don't try to pull them apart.
- Prevent future fights. This may mean keeping Fluffy and the other cats totally separated from each other while working on the problem, or at least preventing contact between them in situations likely to trigger a fight.

- Don't punish Fluffy and the other cats involved. Punishment is likely to elicit further aggression and fearful responses, which will only make the problem worse. Attempted punishment may redirect the defensive aggression.

Because their social organization is somewhat flexible, some cats are relatively tolerant of sharing their house and territory with multiple cats. It's not uncommon for Fluffy to tolerate some cats, but not get along with others in the house. However, the more cats sharing the same territory, the more likely it is that some of the cats will begin fighting with each other. When introducing cats to each other, one of them may send play signals which can be misinterpreted by the other cat. If those signals are interpreted as aggression by one of the cats, the situation should be handled as aggressive.

The factors which determine how well cats will get along together is not fully understood. Cats that are well-socialized (they had pleasant experiences with other cats during kittenhood) will likely be more sociable than those that haven't been around many other cats. On the other hand, street cats that are in the habit of fighting with other cats in order to defend their territory and food resources may not do well in a multi-cat household. Genetic factors also influence Fluffy's temperament, so friendly parents are probably more likely to produce friendly offspring.

Introducing a New Cat to Other Pets

It's important to have realistic expectations when introducing Fluffy to a resident pet. Some cats are more social than other cats. For example, an eight-year-old cat that has never been around other animals may never learn to share his territory and/or people with other pets in the household. However, an eight-week-old kitten separated from her mom and littermates for the first time might prefer to have a cat or dog companion. Cats are territorial and need to be introduced to other animals very slowly in order to give them time to get used to each other before there is a face-to-face confrontation. Slow introductions help prevent fearful and aggressive problems from developing.

Confinement

Confine Fluffy to one medium-sized room with his litter box, food, water and a bed. Feed the resident pets and Fluffy on each side of the door to this room. This will help all of them to associate something enjoyable such as eating with each other's smells. Don't put the food so close to the door that the animals are too upset by each other's presence to eat. Gradually move the dishes closer to the door until all pets can eat calmly together, directly on either side of the door. Next, use two doorstops to prop open the door just enough to allow the animals to see each other, and repeat the whole process.

Swap Scents

Switch sleeping blankets or beds between Fluffy and the resident animals so they have a chance to become accustomed to each other's scent. Rub a towel on one animal and put it

underneath the food dish of another animal. This should be done with each animal in the house.

Switch Living Areas

Once Fluffy cat is using his litter box and eating regularly while confined, allow him to have free time in the house while confining the other animals Fluffy's room. This switch provides another way for the animals to experience each other's scents without a face-to-face meeting. It also allows Fluffy to become familiar with his new surroundings without being frightened by the other animals.

Avoid Fearful and Aggressive Meetings

Avoid any interactions between pets that results in either fearful or aggressive behavior. If these responses are allowed to become a habit, they can be difficult to change. It's better to introduce all pets to each other so gradually that neither animal becomes afraid or aggressive. Expect mild forms of these behaviors, but don't give them the opportunity to intensify. If either animal becomes fearful or aggressive, separate them, and start over with the introduction process in a series of very small, gradual steps, as outlined above.

Precautions

If one pet has a medical problem or is injured, this could stall the introduction process. Check with a veterinarian to be sure all pets are healthy. Make sure there is one litter box per cat and clean all litter boxes more frequently. Make sure none of the cats are being ambushed by Fluffy while trying to use the litter box. Try to keep the resident pets' schedule as close as possible to what it was before the newcomer's appearance. Cats can make lots of noise, pull each other's hair, and roll around quite dramatically without either cat being injured. If small spats do occur between cats, don't attempt to intervene directly to separate the cats. Instead, make a loud noise, throw a pillow, or use a squirt bottle with water and vinegar to separate the cats. Give everyone a chance to calm down before re-introducing them to each other. Be sure each cat has a safe hiding place.

Dog and Cat Introduction - Practice Obedience with Dogs

If Fido doesn't already know the commands "sit," "down," "come" and "stay," begin working on them. Small pieces of food will increase Fido's motivation to perform, which will be necessary in the presence of such a strong distraction as a new cat. Even if Fido already knows these commands, work with obeying commands in return for a tidbit.

Controlled Meeting

After Fluffy and Fido have become comfortable eating on opposite sides of the door, and have been exposed to each other's scents as described above, attempt a face-to-face introduction in a controlled manner. Put on Fido's leash and using treats, have him either sit or lie down and stay. Have another family member or friend, enter the room and

quietly sit down next to Fluffy, but don't have them physically restrain him. Have this person offer Fluffy some special pieces of food or catnip. At first, Fluffy and Fido should be on opposite sides of the room. Lots of short visits are better than a few long visits. Repeat this step several times until both Fluffy and Fido are tolerating each other's presence without fear, aggression or other undesirable behavior.

Let a Cat Go

Next, allow Fluffy freedom to explore Fido at his own pace, with Fido still on leash and in a down-stay. Meanwhile, keep giving Fido treats and praise for his calm behavior. If Fido gets up from his stay position, he should be repositioned with a treat lure, and praised and rewarded for obeying the stay command. If Fluffy runs away or becomes aggressive, return to the previous introduction steps.

Positive Reinforcement

Although Fido must be taught that chasing or being rough with Fluffy is unacceptable behavior, Fido must also be taught how to behave appropriately, and be rewarded for doing so, such as sitting, coming when called, or lying down in return for a treat. If Fido is always punished when Fluffy is around, and never has good things happen in the presence of Fluffy, Fido may redirect his aggression toward Fluffy.

Directly Supervise all Interactions between Dogs and Cats

Keep Fido on leash and whenever Fluffy is free in the house during the introduction process. Be sure Fluffy has an escape route and a place to hide. Keep Fido and Fluffy separated until it is determined Fluffy will be safe from Fido.

Precautions

Dogs like to eat cat food. Keep the cat food out of Fido's reach, perhaps in a closet or on a high shelf. Eating cat feces is also a relatively common behavior in dogs. Although there are no health hazards to Fido, it's distasteful to humans. It's also upsetting to Fluffy to have such an important object invaded. Place the litter box where Fido can't access it, for example behind a baby gate, in a closet with the door anchored open from both sides and just wide enough for Fluffy, or inside a tall, topless cardboard box with easy access for Fluffy.

Outdoors Cats

Many otherwise cat-friendly dogs view outdoor cats as prey to be chased down and dispatched – a strong case for keeping Fido on a leash when out for a walk and keeping Fluffy indoors, particularly when Fido is out in the yard.

A Word about Kittens and Puppies

Because they're so much smaller, kittens are in more danger of being injured by a young energetic dog. A kitten should never be left alone with a dog. Usually, a well-socialized cat will be able to keep a puppy in its place, but some cats don't have enough confidence to do this. An especially shy cat might need to be separated from the puppy until he matures enough to have more self-control.

When to Get Help

If introductions don't go smoothly, immediately seek professional help. Animals can be severely injured in fights, and the longer the problem continues, the harder it can be to resolve. Conflicts between pets in the same family can often be resolved with professional help. Punishment won't work, though, and could make things worse.