

Introducing a New Dog to a Home with Cats

Bringing a dog into a home with cats needs to be done **slowly and carefully**. The aim is to keep everyone safe and give the dog and cats time to get used to each other.

Important: A shelter cat test is NOT a guarantee

We may have tested the dog with cats at the shelter and the dog may have behaved calmly around them.

This does not mean that the dog is guaranteed to be safe with cats in a home.

Dogs can behave differently in a new environment. A dog that is calm with a cat at the shelter may react differently when they arrive in a home, especially when they are excited, stressed or have had time to settle in.

For this reason, **always take a cautious approach and never assume that a successful shelter test means the dog can be left alone with your cat.**

1. Keep the dog and cats completely separate at first

- When the dog first arrives, keep them in a separate area.
- Your cats should have areas that the dog cannot access.
- Make sure the cats have **high places and escape routes** where they can feel safe.
- Use baby gates, closed doors or other secure barriers.
- Allow the animals to become aware of each other's presence through smells and sounds before they meet face-to-face.
- Do not allow the dog to chase the cats, even as a game.

2. Let the new dog decompress

The first few days are about **settling in, not meeting the cats**.

The dog may be excited, nervous or overwhelmed. Give them time to establish a routine and feel safe.

Your cat's normal routine should also continue as much as possible.

3. Introduce smells first

Before allowing direct contact:

- Swap bedding between the dog and cats.
- Allow each animal to investigate the other's scent.
- Reward calm behaviour around the smell of the other animal.
- Keep everything relaxed and low-pressure.

4. Teach the dog to disengage from the cat

One of the most useful things you can teach a dog is:

“I can see the cat, but I don't need to chase it. I should pay attention to my person.”

At the shelter, we introduce the dog to cats in a controlled way. We first take the dog for a walk so that they are calmer and less excited. We then approach the cat area slowly and allow the dog to see the cat from a safe distance.

Rather than simply waiting to see what the dog will do, we immediately teach the dog what we **want** them to do:

- The dog notices the cat.
- We use a marker such as a click or a word such as **“yes”**.
- We encourage the dog to disengage from the cat and look back towards us.
- We reward the dog for choosing to focus on us.
- We gradually repeat this at a safe distance.

The aim is to create a habit:

See cat → disengage → look at me → reward.

This is particularly useful because if a cat suddenly runs, the dog has already learned that **the cat is not something to chase** and that checking in with their person is rewarding.

At home, adopters should continue practising this behaviour calmly and gradually. **Never deliberately make a cat run to test the dog.**

5. First visual contact

Once the dog is beginning to settle:

- Use a secure baby gate or other barrier.
- Keep the dog **on a lead**.
- Allow the dog to see the cat from a distance.
- Keep sessions short.
- Reward the dog for calmly looking at the cat and then looking away.
- Never force the dog towards the cat.
- Make sure the cat can leave whenever they want.

If the dog becomes very excited, stares intensely, pulls towards the cat, barks or tries to chase, **increase the distance and slow the process down.**

6. Controlled introductions

Only when both animals are comfortable with visual contact should you consider allowing them closer together.

- Keep the dog on a lead.
- Make sure the cat has plenty of escape routes and high places.
- Never hold the cat and bring them towards the dog.
- Never corner the cat.
- Keep the first interactions very short.
- Always supervise.

- End the interaction while both animals are calm.

7. Never allow chasing

Even if the dog appears to be playing, **chasing a cat must not be allowed.**

Chasing can be extremely frightening for the cat and can quickly become dangerous.

If the dog starts to chase, calmly interrupt and separate them. Go back to an easier stage of the introduction.

8. Never leave them alone together

Do not leave the dog and cats unsupervised until you are completely confident that it is safe.

This may take days, weeks or longer.

Even if they appear to get along, continue to provide the cats with areas where they can escape and feel safe.

How do I know if the dog is relaxed?

Look for:

- Loose, relaxed body language.
- Soft eyes and a relaxed mouth.
- Sniffing and exploring normally.
- Looking at the cat and then looking away.
- Responding to you when you call them.
- Taking treats gently.
- Being able to settle with the cat nearby.
- Choosing to move away from the cat.

The ability to disengage from the cat is particularly important.

How do I know if the dog is too interested?

Be particularly cautious if the dog:

- Stares intensely at the cat.
- Becomes very still or stiff.
- Follows the cat constantly with their eyes.
- Pulls strongly towards the cat.
- Whines, barks or becomes highly excited.
- Tries repeatedly to chase.
- Lunges towards the cat.
- Cannot respond to you or take a treat when the cat is present.

These behaviours mean **you need more distance and more time.**

Watch the cat too

Cats can become extremely stressed by a new dog.

Signs of stress can include:

- Hiding more than usual.
- Avoiding areas of the home.
- Hissing or growling.
- Flattening their ears.
- A puffed-up tail.
- Trying to escape.
- Refusing food.
- Toileting outside the litter tray.

Give the cat plenty of safe spaces and never force them to interact with the dog.

Remember

Go slowly. Give the cat control. Never allow chasing. Never assume a shelter cat test guarantees that a dog is cat-safe.

The goal is not for the dog and cat to become best friends. The goal is for them to feel **safe and comfortable living in the same home.**

When in doubt, **separate them and slow things down.** 🐾