

Feline: Multi-cat households

Under natural conditions, free-roaming cats may or may not choose to live with one another. Where a colony of cats exist, they are often comprised of related females and visiting males. Unfamiliar individuals are (at least initially) often treated with much hostility. Over time, unfamiliar individuals may or may not integrate into an existing group if resources are abundant and existing members of the group can tolerate the presence of the other cat.

As a socially flexible species, social bonds with other cats are not essential for survival, and most cats generally prefer to be the only cat within a household. For the best chance of a harmonious feline household, consider adopting two related cats and/or cats already housed together at our facility.

Even if a cat has lived successfully with a cat in the past, this does not necessarily indicate that they will be able to tolerate sharing a territory with a new cat in the future. There is little research that explores whether cats experience grief because of the loss of a beloved feline companion. Even if they did, adding a new cat to the household is not going to resolve this emotion, as it is that individual with which they shared a bond that is important to them. Adding an unfamiliar cat to the home may cause additional stress.

Some unfamiliar cats can coexist if introductions are gradual and the environment can accommodate enough resources so that there is no perceived competition. In addition, genetics, early learning/life experiences with other cats and current health status are some of the factors that may also influence a cat's ability to coexist with another feline companion.

What to consider *before* introducing an additional cat to the home

Is your resident cat displaying any behavioural concerns? Are they suffering from a medical condition that affects their behaviour?

Cats that are recovering from illness or injury are likely to have a reduced capacity to cope with additional stressors. We would advise you to speak with your veterinarian about their condition and when/if it may be appropriate to introduce a new cat before doing so. If your current cat is displaying any behavioural concerns such as (but not limited to) toileting in undesirable locations, causing injury to other members of the household, excessive vocalising or spending lots of time withdrawn and hiding, then it is recommended that you speak with your veterinarian and a behaviour consultant to address those concerns before considering adopting an additional cat.

If you have more than one cat already, do these cats coexist well?

Cats that have a social bond will often show behaviours such as mutual grooming, rubbing against one another and resting/sleeping touching one another. If there is an absence of these affiliative behaviours but equally an absence of conflict, your existing cats are likely to only be coexisting/tolerating one another. It is best to seek advice from a behaviour consultant before introducing a new cat to the home. If cats within the home have a 'rocky' relationship, then adding an additional cat is likely going to make matters much worse. Consult with a feline behaviour consultant and your veterinarian to address the existing tension in the home before adopting an additional cat.

Are you willing to add many additional resources to the home?

To facilitate harmony within the home resources must be abundant. A cat's key resources are:

- ① Hiding places both on the ground and at vertical height
- ② Food bowls
- ③ Water bowls
- ④ Litter trays
- ⑤ Scratching objects
- ⑥ Toys

It is generally recommended that you have one resource per cat, *plus* an extra, placed in different locations. So, if you have two cats, you should have *at least three* of each resource listed above, placed away from each other. For example, a household with two cats should have at least three litter boxes scattered throughout the home.

Link



- ↘ For more information on a cat's key environmental needs please refer to the **AAFP and ISFM Feline Environmental Needs Guidelines:**
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1098612X13477537>

Do you have the time to complete a gradual introduction process?

The introduction process can take anywhere from a few weeks to several months. The cats will determine the pace at which you proceed through each step listed - patience is key. All cats involved must be comfortable at each step before proceeding. The slower that you move through this guide, the greater the chance of harmony.

If things go wrong, do you know where to access support?

When things go wrong, it is incredibly stressful. The cats should never be left to simply 'work it out' on their own as they (as a species) have limited skills to repair conflict, and it is likely to worsen. In the case of an emergency, please separate the cats immediately and house them in separate locations with all their key resources. If any injuries occur, please contact your nearest vet for advice as soon as possible.

Support



- ↘ The sooner that you reach out for support, the better for all involved. We recommend that you contact the RSPCA facility that you adopted from to speak with a qualified behaviour consultant or book a virtual consult with our Veterinary Behaviourist at Sydney by contacting the RSPCA NSW Sydney Veterinary Hospital at **(02) 9770 7575**. Alternatively, you can email our RSPCA NSW Behaviour Team **mail@rspcansw.org.au**

The introduction process

When your new cat arrives at the home, they should be placed in a separate area (that the resident animals cannot access) with all their key resources. They should be given a minimum of one to two weeks to adjust to their new surroundings and be comfortable within their designated space before completing each step below. If they are showing any concerns, please contact us for advice *before* proceeding.

A gradual introduction process is critical, allowing them to process through one sense at a time to ensure that it is not overwhelming for any of the cats involved. The order of this process involves an introduction using their senses in the following order: hearing, smell, sight, and lastly, touch. While the new cat is settling into their space they would have been introduced to the sound of the resident cat.

Step 1:

Start with exchanging the scent of the cats with each other. This can be done by collecting a small cloth for each cat and gently rubbing the facial region of each for a few seconds with *one* of the cloths. Each cat must be open to touch when collecting the scent - try again later if they do not wish to be touched at this time. Once the scent has been collected, swap each cloth, and place it in a neutral area of each cat's space (away from their key resources) for them to investigate in their own time. Repeat this every couple of days by collecting more of the scent on the cloth and returning it to the neutral area. This can also be completed passively by continuously swapping a piece of bedding between each. If either cat appears distressed by the odour, such as hissing at it, remove the scent and try again on a different day with less concentration of the odour. The goal of this step is for the cats to sniff the scent, then ignore it or actively interact with it (refer to the image).



Step 2:

If both cats are relaxed around the scent, you can rub each scent around areas of the home, such as on corners of walls or furniture at cat head height.

Step 3:

Once both cats are comfortable with the presence of the scent, you can proceed to a visual meet through a barrier. Ideally, this barrier will be solid, such as a glass door to begin with. However, you can also use a fly screen or baby gate covered with mesh.

Never force or lure the cats to the barrier; they should always have control over their proximity to each other.

This step should be as passive as possible; ideally, everyone will be engaging separately with play or treats a great distance away from the barrier but still have visual access. Make sure that each cat has places they can easily go to hide or reach vertical height. Pairing something that each cat enjoys while in the presence of the other may assist with developing a positive perception of each other. If anyone approaches the barrier, this can be allowed, but if any undesirable behaviour is shown, you should immediately block visual access with a towel or sheet barrier. You will have to wait a few days before trying again. Keep each session short and always try to finish on a positive note, such as the cats sniff each other once, then move away, or calmly engage separately in other activities such as food/toys in each other's presence.

Step 4:

Once they are comfortable behind the barrier, they can be allowed short, supervised access to each other without the barrier. They both must have the ability to always return to their designated areas. The aim should be that they are relaxed in each other's presence, they do not necessarily need to be interacting. As mentioned in the previous step, the cats should never be forced into proximity and should be engaged in play or offered treats separately, a distance away from the other.

Tip



- Keep sessions extremely brief and ensure that each cat has plenty of opportunities to avoid each other by accessing tunnels, boxes, tall scratching towers or tall furniture. It is best to clutter any open floor space with these items.

Step 5:

Over many successful short interactions, the time spent supervised together can gradually be increased, and sessions can be more frequent. Over time, they should be able to coexist unsupervised.

It is important to remember that not all cats will tolerate sharing a home with another cat, even if introductions are completed well and resources are sufficient.

Long term harmony

Cats do not strive to establish dominance. Some cats may appear more confident in their attempts to access a resource, potentially through displays of aggression, while others may be more inclined to avoid any conflict. This is *not* because one cat is trying to 'dominate' the other. Tension arises within the home due to actual or perceived competition over valuable resources, so it is essential that cats are never forced into proximity with one another and there are abundant key resources (food stations, water stations, litter trays, hiding places, scratching objects, toys) scattered throughout the home.

Eating, toileting, and hunting are solitary activities for cats, so they should be able to access these resources alone. If there is tension between cats when preparing meals, ensure they are housed separately *before* preparation. Do not feed cats next to one another or where they can access one another's food resources. Litter trays should be scattered in separate rooms, and string toy play should be completed individually (refer to the handout: "A guide to interactive string toy play" to learn more). Ensure that each cat can engage with humans in the home in their preferred way, without interruption from another cat.

Encourage avoidance

If we take the pressure off the relationship, then they are more likely to be able to coexist. There are certain locations in the home that are "danger zones" for conflict, and these are often narrow places with one exit/entry point (doorways, hallways, staircases). If we give cats the opportunity to avoid each other in these locations by placing items like tunnels, scratching posts, boxes, and wall furniture (see images 1-3 below), then we are reducing the chance of conflict by encouraging avoidance.

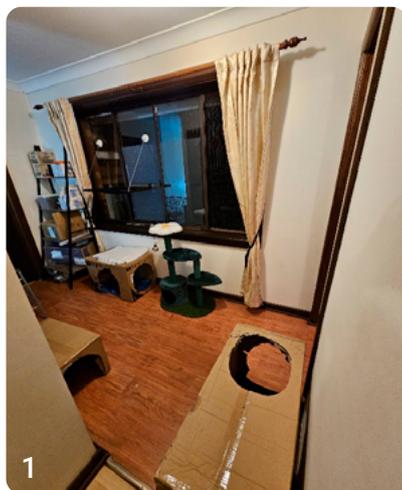


Image 3 source: 2024 AAFP intercat tension guidelines: recognition, prevention and management - Ilona Rodan, Daniela Ramos, Hazel Carney, Theresa DePorter, Debra F Horwitz, Daniel Mills, Kristyn Vitale, 2024

What about play?

Interpreting social behaviour among cats is challenging. The function of social play is to teach young kittens skills associated with predation and allow them to obtain important social skills that can be used later in life. As a kitten ages, the desire to engage in social play diminishes and is replaced with object-related play or predation. Mutual social play is not often observed amongst free-roaming adult cat colonies, as all predatory behaviours are directed towards prey.

While some cats within the home may appear to be “playing” in adulthood, it can be very difficult to determine if it is a pleasurable experience for both cats or whether they are simply in conflict or treating each other as an outlet for predation due to a lack of opportunity to predate in the home. If one cat directs play behaviour to another cat’s tail, for example, then this is not considered mutual social play and is more likely to be predatory behaviour directed towards a tail. Similarly, if an adult cat treats another cat like it were prey, e.g., frequently ambushing it, then this is not mutual social play. Additionally, if one cat chases another cat that does not want to be chased, this is not mutually fun. Therefore, it is not considered mutual social play.

These behaviours may indicate that the cats are engaging in mutual social play

- Rolling in front of each other (sometimes used to initiate social play)
- Mostly silent (no hissing, growling)
- Claws are retracted (no injury occurs)
- Biting is inhibited (no injury occurs)
- They take turns being on top.
- They can be interrupted, or they may have short pauses throughout the interaction.
- Either cat can leave easily but they choose to stay



Image Source: Chin, L. (2023). *Kitty Language*. Ten Speed Press. Book available for purchase at: <https://www.kittylanguagebook.com/>

These behaviours may indicate that the cats are fighting, or the interaction is not mutually fun

- Hissing, growling, or shrieking.
- Prolonged stare offs with tense body
- The interaction cannot be interrupted and there are no pauses.
- One cat stalks and pursues while the other tries to move away.
- Injury occurs.

It is important to separate the cats and contact us if you notice any of these behaviours.



Image Source: Chin, L. (2023). Kitty Language. Ten Speed Press. Book available for purchase at: <https://www.kittylanguagebook.com/>

Questions



- The information in this handout is only intended as a guide. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact our RSPCA NSW Behaviour Team mail@rspcansw.org.au