

Helping Family Cats Be Friends

There are ways to promote peace when felines are feudin'

BY SUZANNE HETTS, PH.D., C.A.A.B.



A paper bag can serve as a hiding place for a cat to retreat to when he feels threatened. Providing safe space can greatly reduce tension between housemates. CYNTHIA BALDAUF

Surveys show that cats now outnumber dogs as the most popular species of companion animal. This is not because cat owners outnumber dog owners, but because cat owners usually have more cats than dog owners have dogs. From this we can conclude that many, if not most cats, live in multicat households.

But conflicts among cats in the family are a common behavior problem, and sometimes result in significant quality-of-life concerns for the cats—and may even lead to relinquishment by owners frustrated by all the caterwauling. Veterinarians tell us that constant social stress can exacerbate or even cause certain diseases that are stress-sensitive. In fact, a recent article

in a veterinary journal (“A case of recurrent feline idiopathic cystitis,” *Journal of Veterinary Behavior*, Vol. 3, No. 1) described a case of feline lower urinary tract disease that was treated, in part, by decreasing the conflicts among the family cats.

Loving and committed cat owners don't want to see one of their cats hiding in the basement or afraid to come out of one room for fear of being harassed by another cat. Sometimes the social stress among cats results in more subtle behavior changes; perhaps one cat won't ever come into a room when another cat is there. Or as soon as one cat enters a room, the other leaves.

Many of our clients over the years have reported how their surviving cat seemed to blossom after the death of another family cat who'd long antagonized

the survivor. Owners may not even notice how much one cat is trying to fly under another's radar until the cats are separated for some reason.

Advice for the Feline Set

Anyone trying to maintain peace (or at least a state of mutual tolerance) between cats should learn a bit about feline social organization. Our domestic cat's wild ancestor is a nocturnal, solitary species, with females capable of raising young on their own without the benefit of a social group. Domestication has resulted in companion cats developing greater flexibility in their social organization, but they have not evolved the complex social mechanisms that allow group-living canines to more easily establish and maintain harmony among group members.

Because of this, once conflicts between cats develop, it is much harder for the cats to resolve them and be friends. That's why it's so important to prevent these conflicts from developing in the first place.

Conflicts among family cats are much more likely to be about personal space and territory, not so-called "dominance." This is important to comprehend because what owners do to prevent and resolve conflicts must be based on an accurate understanding of why they are happening.

For example, there is no need to support one cat's "dominance" over another—a recommendation we sometimes see in popular books. Instead, cat guardians should take steps that will help cats maintain adequate social distance and help them become familiar with and begin to trust each other without bad experiences.

Learn to quickly identify the early signs of problems by being a keen observer of the cats' behaviors. Watch to be sure none of them are consistently avoiding each other. Another red flag can be "play" that isn't mutual. If one cat is being chased by another, but is never the one initiating the chasing, it's more likely this is not play chasing but something more serious.



Suzanne Hetts (shown here with Buffett) is an award-winning speaker and author. She and her husband, Dan Estep, Ph.D., C.A.A.B, co-own Animal Behavior Associates in Littleton, Colo., and provide online behavior education for pet professionals at BehaviorEducationNetwork.com and for pet owners at HelpingKitty.com and HelpingFido.com.

Guardians who notice behavior patterns that concern them have a number of choices as to what to do first. If cats suddenly become aggressive, cease eating, become irritable, begin to spray, or cease using the litter box, a trip to the veterinarian is in order. All of these behavior changes can be the result of social conflict, but they can also be prompted by disease or illness. A veterinary evaluation will help rule out medical causes.

If cats are out-and-out fighting, they should be separated immediately. Owners should seek help from a certified applied or veterinary behaviorist, or other behavior consultant whose credentials are solid and who has experience with cat behavior. Shelters can encourage cat adopters to contact them for behavior assistance or references for good behaviorists.

Creating Safe Spaces

If owners recognize social tension among cats—tension that hasn't yet erupted into fighting—there are a number of home environment changes that may facilitate their cats' ability to create more social distance among themselves.

First, they can make sure their cats have plenty of hiding places. We recently talked to a woman who had done nothing more than put a small crate and a couple of paper bags down on the floor of her townhome; she noticed an immediate reduction in her cats' hissing matches. One cat would retreat to the crate when the second cat went after her; the crate provided her with a safe escape. While this wasn't the only step that was needed, it provided some immediate stress relief for the cat being harassed.

Another way to provide an escape place is to install a magnetized indoor cat door. The flap to the cat door is kept closed by a powerful magnet that is deactivated by a collar one cat wears. Installing the cat door into the door to a bedroom, study, or storage area allows only the cat wearing the collar to enter the room. This is a great way to provide a safe haven for a cat who's having relationship problems.

In one of the few studies done on the behavior of indoor cats, researchers found that cats sometimes live at densities 100

times greater than those of free-ranging cats in colonies. This means social conflicts are more likely because indoor cats cannot distance themselves from other cats the way free-ranging cats can.

While the humane and animal sheltering communities have long promoted keeping cats indoors, we must acknowledge that an outdoor living situation, compared to that of indoor cats living in a confined space, gives cats an easier opportunity to avoid other cats with whom they don't get along. When owners have multiple cats living indoors, they must take extra care to minimize conflicts between them. Some behavior experts, in fact, are beginning to argue that keeping a cat entirely indoors can contribute to both health and behavior problems.

While allowing cats to roam free is fraught with dangers and not something we'd ever recommend, there can be advantages for some cats to be allowed outside in a restricted or supervised way.

One safe way to allow outdoor access is by providing a leash and safe harness, such as the cat walking jacket (catwalkingjacket.com). Another option is the KittyWalk system (kittywalksystems.com), which consists of wire mesh enclosures of various shapes that can be connected to form small or large containment areas for cats. These products can also be used during supervised introduction procedures (see sidebar on p.63) to allow cats to see one another without being able to get at one another. With their walking jackets on, and with supervision, each cat can be tethered to an immovable object so they can see but not reach each other. Within enclosures that are separate but close to each other, cats can get accustomed to each other's presence without having the opportunity to fight.

Divide and Conquer

Providing multiple litter boxes in multiple locations is another effective way to tamp down conflict. If litter boxes are all clustered in one place, one cat can station herself in a position that another cat will have to pass in order to get to the boxes—creating the potential for a tiff and a house soiling problem.

New Cats on the Block

Many conflicts between cats can be prevented by arranging initial meetings and introductions that prevent either cat from being fearful or aggressive. Advise owners taking home a new kitty to never simply put two unfamiliar cats together and let them “work it out.” This is a recipe for disaster. Instead, they should follow the procedures below. These same procedures can be used with owned cats who aren’t getting along; gradual reintroductions can help ease the tension.

- When you bring your new cat home, don’t allow your current cats to see him. Put your new cat in one room in your house with all the necessities— food, water, litter box, scratching post, and toys.
- Take several old towels or washcloths and rub each cat with one. Take the cloth that has the new cat’s scent and put it in places in the house where your resident cat likes to be, such as her favorite resting place, underneath her food dish, and in your lap. Place the cloth with your resident cat’s scent in the new cat’s room.
- Swap locations frequently: Confine your resident cat to the new cat’s room, and allow your new cat freedom in the house to explore her new digs.
- Stage controlled cat encounters on either side of the closed door where one cat is confined. Encourage both cats to approach their side of the door by making something good happen when they do, and help each cat associate the other with pleasant feelings. The cats should be calm and relaxed in response to each other’s scents and sounds before they are allowed to see each other.
- Allow limited visual encounters between the cats by wedging the door open just a few inches. When neither cat is fearful or aggressive, you can allow supervised contact between them.

For more detailed introduction instructions and information on helping cats get along, see our DVD, *Helping Kitties Co-Exist*, available at HelpingKitty.com.

Many cat owners seem to put the boxes in the basement, but this can make the basement stairs an obvious place for one cat to lie in wait for her victim. But a cat obviously can’t be in two places at once, so multiple litter box locations will ensure all cats have an option for safe access.

The same principle applies to food and water bowls. If the cats are on free-choice dry food, bowls should be placed in several locations. It would be ideal if one bowl could be positioned in such a manner that one cat couldn’t get to it. (For example, an elderly cat may no longer be able to jump up on a high perch or counter that a younger animal can still easily reach; placing one bowl in such a spot will ensure that location remains a safe, solitary café for the younger kitty).

If owners give their cats canned food or special treats from time to time, they can use these sessions to improve their cats’

relationship. Put canned food, or treats, in separate bowls for each cat. The bowls should initially be far enough apart that cats will be relaxed while eating. Over several days, gradually move the bowls closer together until all the cats can be next to one another and be calm while enjoying their food. This tactic will help cats to associate good things (food!) with the presence of the other cats in the household. While it may not fully resolve all feline conflicts, it’s a good place to start.

There are some pairs or groups of cats who will never adjust to one another, and in extreme cases, it’s probably better to find one or more of them another loving home. But with careful introductions, an understanding of cat behavior, and a few simple changes to the home environment, owners can play a role in helping felines become friends. **AS**

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