

Keeping the Peace – Life in a Multi-Animal Household

Dyed-in-the-wool animal lovers seem to have a great deal of trouble limiting the nest to just a single animal. I know I do, with a dog and three cats sharing my life. If it weren't for my very resolute husband and a smallish apartment, I have no doubt there'd be at least another dog in the mix.

When deciding whether to open your heart and your home to another pet, make sure to consider your current furry family member's perspective. While many will thrive having the company of another, especially if they're left alone for long hours at a time, others prefer being the only pet, either because they're not particularly good players with other animals or because they don't want to share your attention. If this is the case, then your current animal should have the deciding vote; after all, he'll be the one living day in and day out with the newbie. Imagine if someone were to thrust a new housemate on you against your will!



A MULTI-DOG HOUSEHOLD

If your pup seems a good candidate for a canine sibling, the next step is to find a love match for him. Consider the types of dogs that your dog gravitates toward in the dog run. Does he prefer playful partners or more laid back types? Males or females? While a younger dog can sometimes bring out the inner pup in your older dog, she can also prove to be a constant annoyance.

Also consider size. A large disparity is undesirable. How frustrating for a little terrier to be consistently manhandled by a pit bull playmate, even if both dogs have a similar play style. It's like a feather-weight sparring with a super-heavyweight! An equally serious concern inherent in size disparities is that of predatory drift, in which a smaller dog (or cat) moves in a prey-like way that triggers a sudden predatory response from a larger dog or a group of dogs. And this is a recipe for potentially deadly disaster that does not go away with time; even after years of living together peacefully, a tragic incident can still occur.

“Howdy Do!”

Initial introductions are so important in starting the relationship out right. Having several short interactions is a good way of acquainting the dogs. Always do these on neutral territory. Walk the dogs past one another or take them on parallel walks to see if they look playful and interested in one another. Allow a polite head-to-tail sniff between them, fostering greater familiarity while still avoiding any direct eye contact. Given all this goes swimmingly, allow for some playful interaction, keeping leashes on but *slack*. Any tension in the leashes can thwart natural movement and thus increase the likelihood of defensive behavior. Still, the leash will allow you to easily separate the two dogs should things go south.

When entering your home, take the newcomer in first to avoid territorial behavior from the resident dog. Keep leashes on but dragging for these early moments.

Avoid fights at all costs, as a fight early on can diminish the likelihood of success. Be aware that aroused play, when allowed to continue for too long, can spiral into a fight. Dogs will often take short breaks from play, giving themselves a chance for a breather. If they are not doing it voluntarily, you must step in and impose a short break every few minutes. Call each dog away or go get him; then ask for a “sit” or “down” for 30 seconds before releasing them back to play.

Life Together

As successful an arranged marriage as it may be, make sure that some of their day includes private time away from each other, especially at the start. Introducing the new dog to a crate can help achieve this. Also make sure that each dog gets time alone with you, time in which you can work on some training as well as share affection.

Training is the best way to assert yourself as leader. So, as important as training is with a single dog, it is absolutely critical in a multi-dog household.

Inter-dog status is not important to all dogs, so establishing hierarchy between dogs is often not necessary. In fact, supporting status can sometimes do more harm than good, as it can result in bullying behavior. It is better to impress upon each dog the importance of polite behavior to gain his life rewards (treats, toys, walks, attention, etc). And since doorways and narrow passages can provoke friction, having well-trained dogs can help establish orderliness in these situations.

Pay attention to the dogs’ behavior around resources such as toys and food. Be aware if one of the dogs stiffens, shows his eye whites, or lifts a lip when the other dog gets near him with the prized possession. Until each dog has had some training so that you can assert some obedience control, separate them for feeding and remove any resources that might cause fights. Possessions such as rawhides may prove too valuable; either the dogs will have to live without them or they should only have them when they’re apart.

DOGS WITH CATS

First and foremost, know your dog. Certain predatory breeds such as terriers, bred to route out small rodents, will be a constant terror to cats and other small animals.

Introductions should be done carefully, safely, and gradually. Start with the animals separated by a door, so that they can get used to each other’s scent before facing the challenges of proximity. You can put their food bowls on either side of the door (starting at a distance and gradually moving the bowls closer to the door) so that they associate the presence of the other with pleasant times in their day.

After a few days of this, try a short introduction. The dog should be kept on leash or crated at all times in the presence of the cat. Do not allow the dog to chase, as it will give him opportunity to practice and perfect a potentially dangerous routine and could also prove quite harrowing for the cat. Instead, have a handful of tasty treats with you so that you can reward the dog for polite, quiet behavior as the cat moves about freely. Do *not* punish your dog for excited behavior, as he may start associating the cat with unpleasantness. Instead, ask for some basic obedience commands such as *sit* or *down* and reward him. If, at any point, the cat becomes overly stressed or afraid, it can take hours for her to return to a state of calm. It’s best to terminate the interaction and try again another day, perhaps more gradually.

Be the master of all initial interactions between the animals. This means keeping them separated when you are not home or not actively supervising. It can also be helpful to establish safe zones for the cat. Cats particularly enjoy the refuge of vertical space, so I decided early on

not to allow my dog on the furniture; this left the furniture as a safe zone to which the cats can escape should they want some distance. Cat trees or nooks in bookshelves also make good, high refuges.

Ultimately, as time passes and they become more comfortable with each other *and* you become more comfortable with their interactions, you may notice patterns emerging in their relationship. I recently introduced my dog Trista to a cat who lived in our building. At the start, the cat Niño gave Trista a fair number of warning thwacks across the snout, his way of establishing that he was no push-over! As they became more familiar with each other, Niño's thwacks became more playful, but his corrections when Trista overstepped her bounds more severe – a nip to her ear (eliciting quite a yelp!) or a battery of thwacks with hissing, to which Trista was quite respectful. It was at this point in the relationship that I knew that not only were they safe companions but also fond, playful ones!

The time spent carefully establishing the relationship will be richly rewarded with years of companionship and harmony. Whatever the species mix, in their earliest interactions, make sure that good and rewarding things happen in each other's company so that their being together is not simply about sharing their favorite resource – you! Play with one while the other enjoys a puzzle toy filled with treats in his crate, for instance. And, as a final caveat, remember that having more pets means more of your time, not less; so, if you are pressed for time with the family you have, be grateful for the love you already share and leave it at that.