

# It Takes Two: Successful Cat and Dog Interactions

Jacqueline Munera, CCBC, PCBC, CAP2

## Can't We All Just Get Along?

Millions of homes have harmonious cat and dog families while others are more reminiscent of a battlefield. While not every cat and dog household can be completely trouble free, a bit of planning, preparation and knowledge can dramatically increase the chances of successful cohabitation. Currently, there are relatively few cat behavior professionals, putting canine behavior professionals in a unique position to identify potential interspecies problems, teach clients how to avoid dangerous cat-dog interactions, train both species to interact appropriately, and provide referrals to cat behavior professionals when needed.

## Sociability

Many people focus on how different cats and dogs are from each other, which often leads to an expectation that conflict between the two is unavoidable. In reality, there are many important similarities between the species, such as both being astute observational learners. They also both share the use of visual, olfactory, vocal and tactile methods that are comparable to many other social mammals.

Most qualified canine behavior professionals understand that domestic dogs are not true pack animals, nor are they all focused on taking control of the human race, but an uncomfortably large segment of the general public still holds onto archaic concepts of dominance and confrontational relationships between the two species. At the same time, the cat world is faced with its own challenges due to the common viewpoint of cats as solitary, independent and lower maintenance individuals simply tolerating the humans they cohabit with. This perception has been promoted in popular literature on cats but is not supported when the scientific literature is reviewed. In actuality, domestic cats have a very flexible social organization dependent upon a number of variables, particularly the availability of food resources. Social harmony is facilitated by methods of resource time sharing, tolerance between individuals and displays of avoidance and affiliative type behaviors.

For both cats and dogs, early experience and personality play a role in later conspecific and interspecies sociability and communicative proficiency. For example, an early study showed pups reared with kittens from 25 days to 16 weeks of age to be more social with kittens than pups not reared with kittens, and kittens reared with pups were more social to other dogs than those not reared with pups (Fox, 1969). Another study indicates that more amicable relations are likelier between cats and dogs in which introductions between the two animals occurred while at least one was juvenile, less than six months of age for cats and less than one year of age for dogs (Feuerstein & Terkel, 2008). One reason may relate to the existence of critical socialization periods lasting from 3 to 12 weeks of age in dogs and approximately 2 to 9 weeks of age in cats (Beaver, 1999, p 138; Beaver, 2003, p 128). Primary social bonds within or between species are formed and species identification occurs during this time, facilitating interspecies and conspecific affiliation if exposure occurs. These affiliations may then be further



*Mia and Pedro snuggle.*

strengthened during the juvenile period, approximately 9 to 12 months of age for cats and 6 to 18 months of age for dogs (Beaver, 1999, p 165; Beaver, 2003, p 200).

## Prevention

Preventing a problem is always preferable to trying to fix an issue once it gets rolling. Unfortunately, a good percentage of our clients don't seek professional help until their tolerance threshold for undesirable pet behavior is surpassed. The first step for any behavior professional is to find out what expectations the clients have, and then determine what realistic outcomes are most achievable. Consider the characteristics, personality, habits and training levels of both animals, as well as the skill and dedication of the humans involved. For example, if you currently have a cat and are planning to adopt a dog that has extremely high predatory instinct, you may have a problem. A dog with a prior record of cat killing is probably not a good match with a cat-containing household, therefore it is important to understand the dog's history. On the other hand, if you have a sweet-tempered dog that loves everyone and add a dog-hating cat to the household, this may also spell trouble. Obviously, putting thought into which two individuals are most compatible can set the stage for an easier integration and potential friendship. The human element can ease the transition of the most unsuitable cat-dog pairing or turn a perfect pairing into a nightmare, so be sure to thoroughly evaluate the dedication and skill level of all involved.

## Meet Species Needs

Domestic dogs have faced selection pressure towards category and job niches opened by human social evolution such as livestock guarding and herding, hunt assistance, and human protection. Take home message: Dogs NEED jobs! A dog without a job is a dog heading for trouble, which is not an ideal direction to go in any household. Consider the dog's breeding, temperament, and personal preferences in order to find a variety of physical and mental work to fulfill his or her requirements (Photo 1).

Cats, on the other hand, have faced very little active pressure in development to coexist with humans (Izawa & Doi, 1994), but that doesn't mean that they are happy to live an unemployed, couch potato life. Cats are designed for action: intelligent, observant and athletic. Easy access to an ample supply of kitty kibble is not a beneficial set-up for such a superb predator. Cats can benefit from all the same types of mental exercise as dogs, such as puzzle/food toys and scavenger hunts (Photo 2), but remember to include various vertical levels.

Both cats and dogs often demonstrate overall positive behavior changes from the mental challenges of participating in reward-based fun training, interactive play sessions, and an endless variety of occupations such as agility, Rally-O,

pet therapy and animal assisted activities. Appropriate activities can help keep the peace in a multi-species household.

### Household Set-up

Many problem interactions can be eliminated by simply setting up an appropriate environment. Most houses have at least a few trouble spots, including blind corners, doorways, and narrow passages such as hallways and stairs. Each individual should be able to navigate the household and meet his or her needs without confrontation. This can be easily accomplished by utilizing vertical spaces and furniture placement to create a kitty highway (Photo 3). The cat should have multiple areas that are safely out of reach for the dog. For example, sturdy cat trees that lead to tall bookcases or shelving that the dog can't get to, under-furniture areas if the dog can't fit, and possibly access to a room through a pet door too small or high for the dog. Dogs and cats should both have their own private area, such as a crate or bed, where they can go for alone time.

### Seriously, Focus on the Positive

Rewarding desired behaviors is one of the keys to peaceful coexistence of any species. Far too often we ignore the behavior we actually want and then react to displays we don't approve of. For example when the puppy is chewing on his toy we ignore him and when he chews on our shoe we jump up yelling and chase him around the room. The chase game for shoe chewing is probably much more rewarding than being ignored for dog toy chewing. Give Puppy a treat for lying still while Kitty sniffs his foot. Give Kitty a stroke from her favorite brush for resisting the urge to swat the dog as he walked under the cat's perch. If the cat comes up, sniffs the dog's toe, and the dog stays calm, reward both animals for nice behavior.

Don't forget that you can reward for ignoring the other animal as well. For example, if the cat likes to run full speed through the room, which makes the dog bark and chase wildly after her, start teaching the dog to ignore the cat's motions by rewarding him really well for any bits of calm behavior. Be creative in finding good behaviors to reward and everyone will have fun.

### Most Common Challenges

#### The Chase

One of the most common challenges faced by households with both cats and dogs in residence is the dreaded chase. It is important to realize that domestic cats are both predator and prey, which means that flight is often an initial response to real or perceived danger. Unfortunately, that is a prime trigger for initiating canine predatory behavior, and things can quickly get out of hand even between a pair with a generally positive relationship. If the cat has been declawed, the situation is even more dangerous to the cat because she is deprived of a primary means of defense and may have difficulty accessing safer vertical spaces. It is vital to provide easy access to safety zones through ramps, steps or furniture placement (Photo 4). The opposite situation, in which the cat is the chase culprit, is not all that uncommon either and can be just as dangerous and damaging to the relationship.

#### Hey, That's Mine!

Most people realize that resource guarding can be a challenging and serious issue with some dogs but are surprised to learn that cats can also be very serious about protecting their resources. Resource guarding is a natural behavior beneficial to many species, including humans. Just imagine how you would feel if someone walked up and tried to grab the last doughnut from your hand!

Cats and dogs can guard any manner of people, places and things, which is a dangerous situation for all involved. Although most resources available on the topic are designed for dogs, many include tips that are also beneficial when working with a cat. Sometimes the problem needs active behavior modification, while other times a simple change in the environmental set-up can stop the need for guarding.

#### What Did You Say?

Not surprisingly, interspecies communication differences can also be a challenge in cat-dog interactions. For example, cats generally meet another potentially friendly cat nose-to-nose and work their way back, while dogs prefer the butt-sniff as a starting point. Research indicates that cats and dogs are quite capable of learning each other's communicative signals (Feuerstein & Terkel, 2008), as well as those from the humans they live with (Miklosi et al, 2005), especially if they are exposed to the other species while they are young — certainly not

**Photo 1:**



*Mia at work shredding sensitive documents.*

**Photo 2:**



*Jazzy and Pedro get a workout with the Egg-cersizer.*

**Photo 3:**



*Cats hang out in the tree-house.*

**Photo 4:**



*Various levels of shelving create steps to a safe catwalk.*



surprising news to most of us humans already living with inter-species households! However, there are many reasons for miscommunications between a particular cat-dog pairing. For example, one or both may have had no previous exposure or positive interactions with the other species and therefore no experience with the different “language.” Additionally, some individuals are poor communicators within their species and for a multitude of reasons don’t “speak” their own language very well. For example, some declawed cats over-emphasize distance-increasing behaviors in non-threat situations. This can confuse everyone around them, no matter the species! Another common challenge is the one-dog household in which the dog has little or no experience interacting with anyone other than his own humans due to an isolated lifestyle and improper or inadequate socialization as a pup.

## Introductions: Nice to Meet You (or Not)

Introductions can set the stage for lifetime friendships, neutral indifference or tenacious animosity. Serious problems can arise from the old-school style introduction method of tossing the two together to work things out on their own. It is safer and more beneficial to take the new pet to a predetermined safe-room stocked with all necessary supplies, such as litter box, cat perches, bed, toys, food and water, where he can relax and start to investigate his new surroundings safely. The two animals should be kept separated initially while the newcomer becomes accustomed to his new home.

It is best to start introductions slowly and proceed to the next level only after both animals are comfortable. If you are working with a client, teach them that a slow and gradual introduction means exactly that. It does not mean that everyone should be the best of friends in less than a week! How do you know it is time to move to the next step? Obvious signs include an absence of hard staring, hissing, growling,

or barking, but also look for relaxed muscles, sociable behaviors and indicators that the current level is basically a non-event. By non-event, I mean that the dog and cat are comfortable enough with a level of interaction that they almost ignore each other and are focused on the human and receiving their reinforcement. This is very different from one or both individuals avoiding eye contact and exhibiting avoidance behaviors to make themselves inconspicuous.

Scent plays an important role for animals learning about each other, so let them have access to items with each other’s scent. Contrary to common practice, I do not recommend scent swapping by rubbing one individual with a cloth and then wiping the other individual with the same cloth to familiarize the scents.

Cats, in particular, can be highly sensitive to unfamiliar or offensive odors either on their fur or on their human’s hands and clothing. I imagine it would be particularly distasteful to have an unknown dog odor rubbed into my fur! I prefer to initiate positive associations to a scented cloth item through play, food, stroking, or other reinforcement. Teaching a brief nose target to the scented item, followed by turning away calmly to receive reinforcement, is a perfect way to practice for the eventual real-life introduction. When both individuals are responding to the scent in a relaxed and positive manner, the scent exposure can increase. For example, if the newbie has been staying in a bedroom, let him investigate a few areas of the house a bit at a time, while letting the other resident into the bedroom to sniff around. When it is time for newbie to go back to his room, switch again. Make certain that there are no accidental and unpleasant meetings between the two during the switching process!

Unfortunately, the auditory experience is often overlooked during the introduction process and can play a role in either smoothing the way or seeding difficulty between the cat and dog. Follow the same procedure for desensitizing and counterconditioning sounds as you do for scents.

For visual introductions, gradually let the dog and cat see each other at a distance, ideally through a barrier such as a crate, sliding glass door, or baby gate. Start with each participant engaged in low level activities on their side of the barrier, such as sit, down, or walk, rather than jumping straight into a rowdy game of tug or “pounce on the wand toy.” Keep all sightings positive and end before any tension begins. Perhaps have the cat on one side getting treats and practicing a high-five, while you cue easy behaviors such as “sit” or “attention” with the leashed dog on the other side and down the hall. This is a perfect opportunity to begin playing the “look” game discussed in the Foundation Skills section below. Ideally, particularly in the beginning stages, at least two people participate in a session together so that each animal has a person working with him or her. If you are alone, please take additional safety precautions to avoid undesired interactions and utilize puzzle food toys and mechanical food or toy dispensers, such as the MannersMinder®, to reinforce the animal you are not with during the session. Continue the progress by manipulating the distance apart as well as the activity level, and then gradually minimizing the barriers. The goal is to have the presence of each animal equal good things happening for both animals.

## Household Changes

Many cats and dogs, just like many of us humans, thrive on some predictability and control over their lives. Changes in the household can cause a great deal of stress depending on the individual and this is a prime time for cat-dog trouble to appear in a previously harmonious relationship. Anything that causes tension in the human members of the household (e.g., financial trouble, illness, marriage, moving, etc.) can affect the non-human inhabitants as well. It can be helpful to keep everyone’s primary routine as normal as possible, while adding in more fun and relaxation exercises.

Many people are stumped by the minor (to us) changes that seem to throw their cat or dog into a tail-spin. Some individuals are extremely sensitive to any change in their environment or routine so that something as simple as moving the sofa can cause them high anxiety. That anxiety may be expressed in many ways, such as urine marking, destructive behaviors, or irritability towards another cat or dog in the house. Repeated negative interactions can then degrade the relationship.

Photo 5:



Jazzy, Mia and Zen relax on their station beds and mat.

Photo 6:



Jazzy practices leave it with her favorite treats.

It is important to reduce the anxiety caused by major and minor changes in the household through planning, stress mitigation and potentially medical or nutraceutical intervention.

### The Old Tried and True

I know it is not a surprise to most behavior professionals that cats are not immune to respondent and operant conditioning techniques, but it has long been a challenge to convince our clients. These techniques are vital for any cat-dog issue but they have to be utilized appropriately for success. The most typical mistake people make with respondent conditioning is that they progress in steps too large for the cat or dog, breach their threshold for tolerance of the other animal's behavior, and create even more negative associations instead of neutral or positive ones. On the operant conditioning front, people are becoming more aware that cats often excel with positive training techniques. The most frequent challenge here is to convince clients that cats really are food motivated! If a cat is not interested in working for a specific food reward, evaluate the situation the same way as you would with a dog. Use your creativity to evaluate ways to reinforce desired behaviors with toys, play, food, access to people and other animals, and anything else that your dog or cat enjoys.

### Foundation Skills for Everyone!

Clients are often surprised when I help them solve a previously irresolvable cat-dog challenge in which they had focused only on the canine side of the relationship. "It takes two" (or perhaps in this case we must say, "it takes three," due to the cat-dog-human triumvirate) is not just a pithy expression but rather a statement based on a key ingredient to making successful changes in inter-species interactions. There are no more excuses for not involving the feline part of the family in a behavior modification plan for a cat-dog issue.

The foundation skills everyone, canine and feline, needs to have:

#### Name Game/Recall

I start every member of my household with the Name Game by simply saying the individual's name and reinforcing attention to me. I love using a marker (e.g., clicker, whistle) to decrease latency and increase focus under distraction. The Name Game easily morphs into a recall cue by gradually expanding the distance the cat or dog travels to get back to me for reinforcement.

#### Go to Place

Stationing has long been a handy behavior taught to all manner of zoo species and has an unlimited potential for beneficial uses. A station can be portable (e.g., table mat or towel) or permanent (e.g., tree stump or tile entryway), and each individual could have multiple stations depending on the situation (Photo 5). After the cat or dog can reliably go to and stay on the station, begin to reinforce approximations of relaxed behavior. While they practice relaxing, the mat is used to off-load self control by providing external support and making it easy for the cat or dog to engage in calm behavior in stimulating situations.

#### Leave it

Leave it is a cue to "Don't even think about it!" Use this cue to stop undesirable behaviors such as chase, resource guarding and resource nabbing. Follow it up with further direction about what you want the dog or cat to do, such as go to place or recall. Or, even better, you can chain a recall into the leave it behavior (Photo 6).

### Look Game

The Look Game is one of my favorite behaviors of all time because it is easy to train, versatile to use and extremely effective. The concept can be extended to a Listen Game too! The book *Control Unleashed* (McDevitt, 2007) has so many wonderful ideas detailed in such easy to understand language, it is impossible not to love! The Look Game is one of those ideas with a multitude of uses because it makes stressful situations fun, teaches cats and dogs to self-interrupt before a reactive response is out of control, and trains the learner to pay attention to their human (see also *The APDT Chronicle of the Dog* July/August 2011). All great concepts to practice in inter-species households!

### Recap

Most cats and dogs can get along given a chance, but this does not mean every dog will get along with every cat. After all, do you like every person or dog that you meet? Probably not, but you are still capable of polite interactions with them. Proper training and behavior modification, appropriate introductions, and mental and physical exercise can go a long way towards creating a harmonious household. Do your homework, prepare, proceed slowly and be understanding of both animals' needs.

### Recommended Resources

- APDT Webinar: It Takes Two! Successful Cat and Dog Interactions (email [webinar@apdt.com](mailto:webinar@apdt.com)).
- Behavior Toolkit video by Behavior Works [www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YY7IhoebQo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YY7IhoebQo).
- *Control Unleashed* by Leslie McDevitt.
- Cat and Dog Look Game video [www.youtube.com/watch?v=MN4jp-muj1s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MN4jp-muj1s).
- IAABC.org - See International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants to find Cat Behavior Consultants for networking and referral.
- Moderncat.net is a great site with ideas for environmental set-up for cats and [crijopets.com](http://crijopets.com) makes excellent quality custom cat furniture for kitty highways.
- [www.premier.com](http://www.premier.com) - Premier makes the Manners Minder and the Egg-cersizer mentioned in the article.

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Jacqueline Munera, CCBC, PCBC, CAP 2, is an IAABC CC BC and is co-instructor of the Companion Animal Sciences Institute's Diploma of Feline Behavior program. As owner of Positive Cattitudes in Tampa, FL, she coaches human clients on how to live in harmony with their cats and dogs, while encouraging people to push the boundaries of what they think cats are capable of. Jacqueline presents internationally on a variety of cat training and behavior topics and has published multiple cat related articles. Jacqueline and Jazzmanda are the first human-cat team in the world to pass level 2 of Kay Laurence's challenging test of clicker training skills, the Competency Assessment Programme (CAP). You can contact her or see some of her cat training and behavior videos at [www.PositiveCattitudes.com](http://www.PositiveCattitudes.com).