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PROTOCOL FOR THE INTRODUCTION OF A NEW PET TO OTHER HOUSEHOLD PETS

When you first bring home a new pet, expect a period of transition and adjustment for the other pets in the household. You may find that some pets hide from the new addition, whereas others might try to push it around. Sometimes the original pets will start behaviors designed to get your attention including barking, pawing, stealing items, or pushing the new addition out of the way and jumping on you. All of these can be normal and are not worrisome if they change within a short time or if they become aggressive, a problem exists that will not go away on its own. The sooner you seek help from a qualified specialist, the better.

Before introducing any new pet, make sure it is healthy, has up-to-date vaccinations, and that test results for fecal parasites are negative. It is particularly important that all new cats are checked for their viral titer (feline immunodeficiency virus [FIV], feline leukemia virus [FeLV]) status. Cats with positive results should not be brought into a negative household.

You can make the transition easier for new pets by using gradual introductions. The new pet should be kept separate from the other pets whenever they are not closely supervised. This advice may be extreme, but it is designed to ensure that no injuries occur and that the social system of the original pets is not suddenly fragmented. The original pet(s) should have access to the same areas of the house as previously. If the dog was crated, the crate can still be used. If access was restricted to the first floor, this pattern should continue. The new pet should be placed in a neutral area (den, finished basement, brightly lit bathroom) with toys, a blanket, water, and a litter box if the new pet is a cat, and anything else that it might need. It is important that the new pet not be placed in an area that is considered highly desirable by the other pets. Areas of high value usually include places where the people spend a lot of time with the pets (bedrooms) or where the pets choose to stay when they are alone (around food dishes or on window sills that are good perch sites). If your dog is always crated, you can accustom the dog quickly to a new dog by crating the new dog across the room where it can be seen by the original one. As the dogs become more accustomed to each other, their crates can be moved gradually closer together until they are side by side.

Be sure that the area in which you are confining the new pet is “pet-proof.” This means that toilet seats should be down, electric cords should be tied up and put away, sockets should be protected with child guards, and any valuable or fragile items should be moved. New pets will explore, and that exploration should not endanger them. If the new pet is a very young puppy or kitten, you may wish to crate it for its own protection (see handout on “Protocol for Basic Manners: Training and Housebreaking for New Dogs and Puppies”). Crates do not afford total protection from willful and determined claws and teeth of an uncrated animal, but they do greatly minimize the risk of damage.

Whenever any animal is isolated for any reason it is critical that the animal receive a lot of social attention whenever possible. This is especially true for new pets. When you come home greet the original pets (make all the dogs sit first) and let them out, if this is your normal routine. Do not rush – when people are stressed and rush they may either facilitate undesirable interactions between the pets or not be as attentive to cues about impending problems as they otherwise would. Introduce the new pet gradually. First, spend some time alone with the new pet. Then bring the new pet outside on a leash or harness and let the other pets explore him or her. If you anticipate problems, the other animals also can be on leashes or harnesses. If you have too many animals to adequately monitor under these circumstances, the new pet can be placed in a crate or cage in the center of a room and the other pets can explore the caged pet.

The best time to perform gradual introductions is when the animals are calm. Start by petting the original pets and telling them that it is “okay” only if it is truly okay; do not reward hissing, growling, or biting. When you tell a pet it is “okay” when it is upset, you are not calming the animal you are rewarding the inappropriate behavior. If the animals in the household are calm and either ignores each other or act friendly despite the new addition, you can feed them within sight of the new pet. This distance should be close enough that they can easily see and watch each other, but not so close that they become upset. Once you find this distance you can move their food dishes closer together by an inch a day until they are side by side. If you ever have an aggressive encounter, back off from that distance and return to the last distance where neither pet reacted. Leave the dishes there for a few days and then gradually start to move them again. Feeding and petting the animals in each other’s presence teaches them that good things happen when they are together and calm. For this to be successful, neither side can react violently. If a pet does react this way, banish that animal to a neutral zone immediately and try again when it is the day or evening and try later in the day or during the next morning.

Some aggressive and undesirable interactions are not violent but are still not conducive to the development of a good relationship between the pets. You can learn to watch for subtle behaviors that can signal potential problems, should the recipient of those behaviors not be able to change the course of the interaction. In dogs these behaviors include piloerection (hair lifting on scruff, neck, or back), Staring, snarling, stalking, side by side posturing with growling or lip lifting, and pinning the other animal by grabbing its neck. Cats are masters of subtle threats, and their biggest non-vocal threats include a direct stare and an elevation of the rump and the base of the tail with or without piloerection. Hissing, snarling, and pouncing are also threats but are less intimidating to many animals than the display just described. If you believe that the new pet either is losing the contest or is terrified, or is becoming so aggressive that it might injure the other pet, separate the animals. Do not put your hands or other body parts between the animals. This is the single most common way in which people are injured by pets. Use cardboard, brooms, loud noises (whistles, foghorns), or water pistols to separate the animals. If you can identify the aggressor, banish that animal to neutral turf. If you cannot identify one aggressor, banish every animal to different pieces of neutral turf.

If the new pet is sitting in close proximity to the other pets and everything seems to be going well, tell all the animals that they are good and give them all small food treats

and petting, if they like to be petted. This works best if you have two people so one can hold the new pet while the other deals with the other animals.