

INTER-CAT AGGRESSION: WHY CATS FIGHT

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We've all *heard* it: "Cats are not social." What we all need to **know** is that is just not true.

A species is classified as social if members form long-term pair bonds, live in family groups, or live in larger groups with a relatively stable long-term membership. Cats DO have social organization. They live in "colonies" when food resources allow. They show individual recognition and have preferred associates. The queens co-operatively rear young and there is communal nesting, midwifing, nursing, grooming, and guarding. Research shows that "preferred associates" allogroom more, allorub more, and are in physical contact more than non-preferred associates. Preferred associates do not associate exclusively at specific sites of preferred resources, e.g. food, resting sites. Instead, they are often found together in a large number of sites and the association is random with regard to location. This fact rules out the hypothesis that cats simply tend to go to the same resources at the same time of day or are forming aggregations. The preferred associates can be female-female pairs, male-male pairs, or male-female pairs. Also, multiple sets of preferred associates may effectively form trios or tetrads of cats that form a 'clique' within the larger group. Of a special note, intact males may be preferred associates, allorub, allogroom, and rest together.

So, with the cat as an anti-social species myth debunked, that still leaves us with the conundrum of how to get the cats that we want to be together in the same home live together in harmony?

When I'm asked – and it's often – how to choose a cat to adopt into a household where one or more cats already live, I say: "Do you have one of those Magic 8 balls?" Because that will give as good an answer as I can...

When pressed, I do make the following recommendations:

- [Adopt a kitten](#), say 12-16 weeks old. As a general rule, kittens are more resilient and tolerant. They are primarily play-driven – which can be a good thing or a bad thing, but it's their thing.
- Adopt an opposite sex kitten. Again, generalities. There will ALWAYS be exceptions. But opposites tend to do better.
- Adopt 2 kittens! They will play with each other, thereby taking the pressure to play off the older cat. I've seen this work first-hand and it's delightful to watch. The kittens romp and play while the older cat watches. Over time, if the older cat wants to join in, it can. If not, no problem. It's off doing its own thing while the kittens are off doing theirs.
- With adopting a kitten or kittens, the length of separation from the older cat [or cats] doesn't have to be long – just enough to make sure that everyone is healthy, vaccinated, etc. Then, as I have done myself, the kitten is just put in with the older cat. Supervise as necessary, but generally [again, that word!] things go well.
- [Adopting an adult is a different and often more difficult matter.](#)

Intraspecies Aggression in the Cat – "Cat Fights"

Early history can play a very important role as to how two adult [stranger] cats are going to get along as extensive social learning occurs from 2-16 weeks and beyond. Raising cats from 5-6 weeks onward with no contact with their own species can result in serious incompetence in social skills. Unless a cat owner intends to always have one cat at a time, they should probably always have multiple cats, so that social skills can be learned by the juvenile members of the household. Otherwise, think about it: many owners get one kitten, and that kitten never sees another of its kind until another kitten or cat is brought into the home. It makes sense that the existing cat has none of the necessary tools needed to communicate effectively with the newcomer. How could it be anything less than mayhem??

Introduction of a New Cat

It is important to remember that while cats ARE social, their societies are insular, and strangers are not readily accepted. As stated above, kittens and juveniles are generally easier to introduce than are adults. When bringing an adult cat into a household where one or more other adult cats live, the key is to go SLOWLY and with a plan in place.

- Isolate the newcomer in as large a space as is possible. It is important that the new cat feel comfortable.
- This space should be outfitted with all the necessary resources:
 - Food and water
 - Litter box
 - 3-dimensional space – such as cat trees and condos
 - Scratching post and/or mat
 - Toys
- The resident cat [or cats] should remain with access to the rest of the home – with no change to its environment except for denied access to the newcomer's room. The door to that room is to be closed.

The Feliway diffusers [Classic, MultiCat, and Optimum] can be used in both the newcomer space and the rest of the home.

I am NOT a fan of rotating spaces. I find that owners complain about how complicated and cumbersome the technique is. And I don't find that it speeds or improves the introduction process any.

The speed at which the next steps are implemented depends on the cats that are being introduced. I want everyone to be as calm and relaxed as possible. This process cannot be rushed. The goal is to allow safe access to each of the cats – without any chance of a physical altercation. NO fights! As you can imagine, once there's a fight the whole tone of the introduction is tainted. It is important to have the cats learn about each other in as positive a manner as possible from the very start.

- Erect some sort of barrier at the door of the newcomer cat's room.
 - That can be an actual screen door – which works great! It's easy for the human to come and go and it provides options for the cats' access to one another. It can be a complete screen door or it can have a solid panel on the bottom that can be removed later in the process [\[side bar – pictures of screen door and other barrier options\]](#)
 - One of my favorites is a lattice screen – the kind used for a garden trellis or around the crawl space of a house. It's lightweight, easier to move around [it can bend around corners], it can be cut to size, and it's inexpensive. As treatment progresses, more than one can be placed around the home to provide more than one area of separation – if desired and/or necessary.

Once the barrier is in place, it will be easier to get an idea of what the temperaments of the cats we're trying to introduce are.

- Are they "okay"? Does the newcomer go to the door and act curious? Does the resident cat do the same? Do they touch noses and walk away?
- Is the resident curious and non-reactive but the newcomer timid? Does the newcomer not come to the door at all? Are they hiding?
- Is the resident cat reactive? Do they run up to the screen hissing and growling? Does the newcomer act likewise or do they hide?
- Does the resident cat show no interest in the space at all?

If the resident cat is reactive, that needs to be addressed. I would go right to medicating the cat with **fluoxetine**. Remember that this medication can take weeks to reach peak effects so plan on separation taking weeks to months. The expected outcome of this medication is for the resident to be able to engage in the activities that will be implemented without hitting the "fight or flight" button.

If the newcomer cat is hiding, that also needs to be addressed – perhaps even more than the reactive resident. I say that because in situations where a newcomer and resident cat are together, it is very often the timid, hiding, running away one that perpetuates the “chase/flee/fight” cycle. So, if the newcomer’s timidity can be addressed prior to physically being with the resident, that’s ideal. The goal is to turn that fear/hiding into curiosity. Never force interactions. Wait for the timid cat to come out. My choice of medication for this type of kitty is **buspirone**. It works faster than fluoxetine and it seems to have a unique quality of increasing “backbone” when it comes to interacting with other cats. That’s why it is strictly avoided in any self-confident or bully cats. Another option is **gabapentin** – either alone or in combination with the buspirone. Some cats also respond very well to **alprazolam** – again, alone or in combination with buspirone.

If the newcomer cat is reactive, then it is addressed in the same manner as with the reactive resident – **fluoxetine**.

If both cats are curious, non-reactive, or disinterested then **no medication** may be indicated. That may change once they are allowed increased access to one another, however.

This step: getting the cats on either side of the barrier to feel more calm and less anxious *can take time*. And again, there is NO rush.

Next, while the cats are separated, start providing them with opportunities to experience positive interactions on either side of the barrier.

- Feeding special food, treats
- Offering catnip
 - This can be a problem if one or both cats become aggressively aroused on the herb. However, if it mellows them out, it can be a very useful tool!
- Playing with them

The goal is for each of the cats to WANT the other to come around. Classical Conditioning! Cat = Something Terrific! And it’s done when both cats are relaxed. If there is any hissing, that’s okay. Shake a can or bag of treats. Diffuse the situation and give both cats a “way out”. Limit the interactions to just a few minutes at first. Leave them wanting more. Gradually, increase the time. Ideally, one or both cats walk away. Or maybe lay down at the barrier. Over time, as they have one safe and positive interaction after the other, the cats learn that nothing bad happens when the other is around, and in fact, great things happen!

Once you have two cats on either side of a barrier ready to interact – meaning no to little hissing or growling, interested in but not focused on each other – it’s time to “tear down the wall”. Depending on how the cats are with each other, this can be a complete opening or removal of the barrier, or it can be a partial opening. If the barrier is a screen door, a doorstop can be placed so that it is open just a couple of inches. If the barrier is a lattice screen, the whole screen can be moved to allow for an inch or so gap at one end. This allows the cats to “bat at” or play with each other – but again, no chance of a real fight or injury. If there is complete barrier removal, I would still recommend short bouts of time where the cats are allowed together. If things go well, great! End the interaction on a good note. Continue to increase the time and type of activities that the cats engage in – until one day – VOILA! The cats are ready to be together.

Unfortunately, that isn’t always the case. It’s not always a happy ending.

Often, cats need to be separated for life. And the “problem” then becomes: How can we make that work? For the human and for the cats – but especially the human. Remember: Having to separate cats for years is NOT what the human signed on for...

When I meet with a client who has cats that don’t get along, I let them know the possible futures that exist: 1) The cats will ultimately get along, 2) The cats will be fine together, but will not be buddies, or 3) There will be one or more screen doors and barriers around the house – and that’s fine.

If the owner hasn’t had the luxury of having a plan in place or cats that previously got along but no longer do, it’s advisable to start from scratch. Separation, medication[s] if warranted, providing positive interactions, gradual and supervised interactions are all recommended. It will take TIME. Not weeks, but months.

Redirected Aggression

This is often the reason that cats who used to get along no longer do. There has been some event – a cat or other critter outside – that has caused intense arousal. In redirected behavior, the individual is thwarted from getting to the trigger [another cat, racoon, etc.], and instead redirects the behavior onto the nearest target: person, or in this case, another cat in the household. This type of aggression can be particularly intense. The arousal can last for hours. And the damage to the relationship for much longer. Think about it: Cat A sees a stray cat outside. The cat gets aroused and wants to get to the stray cat. It can't. Now couple arousal with frustration. Cat A goes looking for a target. Poor Cat B is asleep on the bed. Cat A attacks Cat B. Cat B is beyond confused and maybe fights back. There are now two cats – previously best buds – fighting, neither of them really knowing why...

Cat A – the aggressor – gets medicated with fluoxetine or paroxetine. I've used both with good effects.

Cat B – depending on post-fight behavior – may or may not need medication. If this cat becomes timid and victim-like, then buspirone can be very helpful. If this cat is unfazed by the encounter and there was just one fight, it will generally resolve much quicker – but Cat A may still need to be medicated.

In any case, lots of positive interactions – play, special treats, etc. – can help the process.

There can be recurring behavior on the part of Cat A, especially if the trigger hasn't been addressed. If it is a stray cat or other outside critter, motion detectors can be helpful. Denying access by closing doors or using opaque film on windows and doors that the cats have access to, might also be necessary.

If the aggression is particularly severe, the situation may need a reset – as described above. Going back to Step 1 and moving slowly towards resolution.

Play Aggression

Remember that kittens and cats play rough. When watching two cats "fight", how can you tell if it's a bout of play that's escalated or if it's true aggression? It could be normal behavior. Questions to ask: Is either cat being injured? Does one cat end or attempt to end the play bout when the intensity of play escalates? Does the other cat allow termination of play that is escalating in intensity, or does it continue the escalation from play to fighting? If the answers are No-Yes-Yes, this is normal. It may be more of a problem with cats that were raised in social isolation from their own species and have not learned appropriate social behavior.

Treatment can involve simple diffusion – giving both cats something else to focus on. This can be shaking a bag or can of treats, tossing a fuzzy mouse into the fray, bringing out the wand toy, etc. Medication is generally not indicated. This is normal behavior that has escalated, so the goal is to take both kitties down a notch.