



## HUMANE SOCIETY OF BROWARD COUNTY Behavior Modification Handout

### Introducing a New Pet to Your Household

We have all felt the excitement of bringing home a new pet and the impulse to have him become an active part of the family right away. It is important to be patient with your new pet and allow him time to become adjusted to all the new things he is experiencing. A slow and gradual acclimation to family members, other pets and new routines is best.

#### Starting Off on the Right Paw / Managing Your Environment

Depending on if you have chosen a new dog or a new cat to join your family you will need to use a slightly different introduction technique for each. Some of the exercises for successful introductions will be interchangeable, ie: using positive reinforcement, always supervising your pets and providing safe places for your pet to take a break from the action. You will also need to consider the ages of the animals (new and resident) when letting your pets interact.

- **Dog /Dog Introductions** – Dogs should be introduced in a neutral location to avoid territorial behavior or aggression. Try letting them meet for the first time at a near by park or a friend's backyard. Always keep both dogs on a leash to ensure handler control and to keep dogs from approaching each other head on (nose to nose). Never force physical contact and let them proceed at their own pace. Interrupt sniffing sessions frequently to lower the threshold of arousal and use positive reinforcement, like small tasty food treats, to encourage appropriate behavior. Only offer food treats once dogs are separated so as not to inadvertently cause any competition over a food resource.
- **Dog /Cat Introductions** – If you are bringing home a new dog to meet your cat you need to have realistic expectations about how your cat is going to feel about things. In most cases he probably is not going to be happy. Cats do not tolerate change well and the introduction of a dog into the family is going to bring big changes. Be patient and don't expect them to be best friends right away. Make sure your cat has a safe place away from the dog. A baby gate placed in a doorway and up off the ground several inches will allow your cat to be able to run underneath and escape an intrusion and keep the dog from pursuing. Providing lots of elevated places where your cat can perch will also be helpful. Your cat's food and water, resting areas and litter box should all be off-limits areas to the dog and you should have them located in the safe place so your cat will have easy access to them. You should always keep your dog on a leash for the first few meetings to make sure the dog will not hurt or chase your cat.
- **Cat / Dog Introductions** – If you are bringing home a new cat to meet your dog realistic expectations are still in order. The new cat will already be overwhelmed with new sights, sounds and smells and probably be frightened from a car ride. Have a room already set up for your new cat with food, water, resting area or bed, toys and litter box. Keeping your new cat isolated for a few days will give

him a chance to acclimate to his new environment. You can spend plenty of time with your new cat in his room but you should resist the temptation to let him out to explore until he has calmed down. When you think he is comfortable enough to check things out have another member of the family spend time with the dog outside, in another room or go for a long walk. Letting the cat explore without feeling threatened will be an important first step in helping him to adjust. Once your cat feels comfortable and you feel it is time to meet the dog (this may take several days) take it slow and let your cat approach and proceed at his own pace. Never force any physical contact between your pets. You should always keep your dog on a leash for the first few meetings to make sure the dog will not hurt or chase your cat.

- **Cat / Cat Introductions** – Bringing home a new cat to meet your cat at home can be a challenge. Cats are naturally territorial and in most cases do not easily accept interlopers into their kingdoms. You should prepare a room ahead of time for the new cat. A spare bedroom will work nicely. Have food, water, toys, a resting area or bed and a litter box all set up in the room you have chosen. Your new cat should be isolated in his room for a few days to allow him to adjust to his new surroundings. You can spend plenty of time with your new cat but resist the urge to let him come out and explore until he has calmed down. When you feel the time is right let your new cat come out and investigate and place your resident cat in his room (keep door closed). This will allow each cat to become familiar with the other one's scent. Let your new cat wander around for a few hours and then return him to his room and let your resident cat back out. Use two door stops (one on each side of the door) to prop the door open about an inch, so your cats can see each other. Use food treats to positively reinforce interactions at the door. There may be some hissing and posturing at the door but don't panic this is to be expected. Soon you will be able to prop the door open a little more and eventually let your cats explore each other's environments freely. This process may take some time, so be patient.

### **Avoiding the Pitfalls**

You should never punish your cat or dog for having fearful responses during these introduction periods. It will be natural for your new pet and your resident pet to express uneasiness with the recent changes and there may be some small spats. Never let fights or spats continue without interruption. They will not "work things out on their own" and instead may develop habits of fighting and disagreeing to resolve conflicts. Always try to use benign methods to interrupt fighting behavior. Clapping your hands loudly, using treat or toys to distract them, using cues or verbal commands like sit or come (cues have to have a strong response from your pet for this to work). You don't want your pets to associate a bad thing (punishment) with each other's presence. If the situation warrants extreme measures to break up a fight and it has escalated to a point of serious injury you may need to use an aversive such as; squirting them with water, using a loud air horn or whistle or separating them with whatever you have at hand (chair, broom). Be very cautious when interrupting this behavior. Do not try to separate your pets with your hands or your body. You

could put yourself at risk of serious injury if you physically come between two animals fighting.

### **Tips and Hints**

Now that you have a plan in place here are some tips and hints that will make the transition even easier.

- Never leave your pets alone together unsupervised until you are certain it will be safe for them.
- Provide resources such as food, water, toys, resting areas or beds and litter boxes to each of your pets so they do not have to share. Undesired competitive behaviors could develop if your pet feels his resources are threatened.
- Learn to recognize your pet's body postures and what they mean. Fights will be easier to avoid if you distract your cat or dog before arousal levels escalate.
- During the critical first few days your new pet is getting used to the household you can help them adjust by swapping scents. Use an old t-shirt you have worn (so it has your scent) and wipe down one of your pets with it (so it smells like him) and place it in a resting area or feeding area of your other pet. Do the same things again except vice-versa. This will swap scents and your pets will be able to get used to what each other smells like and associate the scent with something pleasant (food and favorite resting area).
- Remember slow and easy gets the job done! Don't rush your dog or cat by forcing them to be in close contact and let them proceed at their own pace.
- Always use positive reinforcement (special food treats and kind words of encouragement) to reward your pets for interacting appropriately.
- Practice basic dog obedience with your pet so that you may easier control his behavior. You can register for low cost classes at the Humane Society by calling 954-266-6855.
- Short and frequent meetings between your pets will work better than long encounters.
- Puppies and kittens will need extra supervision when introduced to adult animals. The younger the animal is the more vulnerable it is to injury.
- Try to keep the routine of the house the same. The fewer changes your resident pet has to go through the less stressful it will be for him.
- Remember animals are spatially sensitive and each animal will feel the need for his own space. Avoid confrontations by controlling your pets in confined areas like doorways, hallways, bathrooms and cars.