

New Kitty

on the Block

BY **DEBORAH
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When it comes to cat introductions in your home, take it slow.

Congratulations! You have made the exciting decision to adopt a kitten, but you already have a multi-cat household. What about the existing feline personalities? How do you introduce that newcomer to the mix without upsetting the current social dynamic and maintain the peace?

Before giving your kitten access to your entire home, make just one room her home base.

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Cozy hiding places help kittens feel secure.

To find out how to prepare for your kitten's first week home, visit petcha.com/kittensfirstweek

OLEKSANDR SCHEVCHUK/SHUTTERSTOCK

As a guardian to five resident cats, I've recently asked those questions of myself. The first time was when I was shopping for food at a pet store and instead came home with Kizmet, a kitten that had been found dumped by the side of the road. The second time was when I adopted Jazmine, a melt-your-heart stray kitten at a pet expo.

Every household, cat and situation is unique, but with some practical advice from cat behaviorists, you can successfully integrate that adorable ball of fluff into your home and make a smooth and happy transition for all involved with minimum stress. Here are some key tips they recommend for adding that new furry friend to your home.

1. Visit the vet.

Protect the physical health of all your cats — new and old — before introducing them. Even if your kitten comes with papers documenting her shots and history, that does not necessarily mean she has a clean bill of health. Whether you found her as a stray, purchased her from a breeder or adopted her from a rescue organization, kittens are prone to many contagious viruses (typically those affecting the upper respiratory system), and it is best to be cautious and take your new kitten to the vet first.

2. Create a safe haven for the newcomer.

Cats are territorial, so resist the temptation to let them meet each other right away. As soon as you bring your new kitten home, place her in a safe area that you can keep shut off from the other household cats, such as a spare bedroom or bathroom. Stock the room with a litter box, water and food, toys, a window for her to look out of, scratching posts, a safe hiding area (such as a cat tower with a cubby) and comfortable bedding.

3. Use scent transition for initial introductions.

Smell is vital to recognition in cats, and they can react badly to changes in their environment, so the first introduction to each other should be by “swapping” scents. Use a clean towel and gently pet your kitten's cheek to transfer her pheromones onto the towel. Repeat the same procedure on the resident cats and place each towel where the other cat hangs out. Place it away from the food bowl and litter box. Keep up this exchange several times a day so that the cats become familiar with the different scents.

4. Take it slow and easy.

Along with scent association, begin to gradually introduce the cats to one another by opening the door a crack to let the cats sniff one another. Do not have all the cats meet the new addition at the same time, and stay close by to supervise. Gradually add positive reinforcements to the equation by feeding your cats and kitten treats or meals simultaneously, separated by the closed door. If they display aggression or won't eat, back the food away from the closed door to a more comfortable eating distance and, over the course of time, slowly move the feeding stations closer to the door until they are eating next to each other (but separated by the closed door) without displaying aggression.

5. Explore in peace.

Put your resident cats in a spare room, and let your new kitten out to sniff a larger area of the house without fear of the other cats attacking her, and keep the door open to her “safe place” in case she feels the need to run in for security. Transition to putting one or two resident cats in the newcomer's room to sniff her surroundings while the kitten is exploring the rest of the house.

6. Share the love.

No matter how adorable your new kitten is, you need to spend special bonding time with each individual resident cat who might feel jealous or neglected. Keep their routines as normal as possible and remember that if they act out by hissing, fighting or being aggressive, they are not bad cats. They should not be punished for those instinctive behaviors.

7. Provide vertical space for your cats.

Cats are territorial and, according to Jackson Galaxy — cat behaviorist, author and star of Animal Planet's *My Cat From Hell* — “in a multi-cat household, access to vertical space is not a luxury, it's a necessity.” He continues, “when you add a newcomer to the mix, it makes it all the more important because in order for cats to get along, they have to have a decent amount of personal space, and in many respects, the only way to do that is to redefine how much territory there is.” He recommends giving cats access to high shelving and cat trees/condos (connected like a superhighway) where they can move around the room without touching the floor.

8. Encourage collective activities associated with positive rewards.

Encourage non-threatening interaction among the resident cats and new kitten by playing with something like a wand toy under the closed door that is intriguing to all parties. Eventually introduce the cats to each other with the door open, and encourage shared activities that are associated with positive rewards, such as play time, treat time and meal time. Supervise the interactions, watch for signs of aggression, and gradually increase the time together.

9. Respect the schedule of your cats.

Cats tend to be creatures of habit and having a new family member is disconcerting enough. Keep routines on schedule, such as feeding time, so that resident cats feel secure.

10. Keep the litter boxes clean.

Cats are fastidious when it comes to litter habits, and even the smallest change in environment can result in litter mishaps. By keeping the litter box clean, you'll lessen any chances of “accidents” happening out of territorial anger.

11. Spay or neuter all household cats.

Ensuring all household cats are fixed, including your new kitten (kittens can be safely altered as young as 8 weeks or when they weigh at least 2 pounds) is better for their health, and territorial and negative behavioral issues that can result from the introduction of a newcomer can be greatly reduced.

“Unfixed cats typically define their territories through urine marking, such as spraying, and they fight to defend their territories, making it harder to integrate them,” says Marilyn Krieger, certified cat behavior consultant and author.

12. Respect the personalities, age and circumstances of resident cats.

Assess the personalities of your resident cats and how much time and effort you can put into easing a new kitten into your household before you make the lifetime commitment to adopt. If you have a senior cat or a cat with an illness or disability, for example, it might not be fair to bring a kitten into the mix.

Growing family

Above all else, the best advice is to be patient. With Kizmet and Jazmine, it took less than two weeks for them to endear themselves with their contagious kitten charm to the whole gang. However, it might take several months or longer in some households. Whatever the time frame, just enjoy the antics and energy of your new bundle of fur and before you know it, it will be like your kitten has been part of your happy family all along! 🐾

Deborah Barnes, author of The Chronicles of Zee & Zoey — A Journey of the Extraordinarily Ordinary and creator of the award-winning blog, Zee & Zoey's Chronicle Connection, that follows the everyday journey she shares with her cats as well as other cat related topics, has lived in a multi-cat household for as long as she can remember.



Don't expect your kitten and resident cat to be instant BFFs.