

Blended Families

Bringing a dog into your kitty kingdom

by ARNA COHEN

Dozing side by side, they're not a pair you'd expect to find sharing a house, let alone a couch. Yet whenever 80-pound pit bull mix Bella settles down for a snooze, it's not long before her elderly feline friend, Stinky, joins her, the light touch of paws a testament to the trust and affection they share.

Their friendship began three years ago, when Tanaya Burnham-Delorey and her husband were looking to add a dog to their cats-only household. At a Los Angeles animal shelter, they were immediately drawn to Bella's friendly nature. But the couple's top priority was the safety of Stinky and their younger cat, Ashes. They didn't want to fall in love with a dog and then have to return her if things didn't work out.

Shelter staff brought Bella into a room full of caged kitties, whom she proceeded to ignore, focusing her full attention on her prospective adopters. She went home with them that day.

Today, the 8-year-old dog and senior kitty are the picture of interspecies harmony. But a perfect accord didn't happen overnight: It took about six months before Burnham-Delorey and her husband knew it was going to work. "Just know that ... it is possible to have peace with training and patience," she says.

ARE YOU KITTIFIED?

A dog's breed and size have little to do with creating a peaceable kingdom. Age can be a factor in that senior dogs tend to be less energetic and less inclined to harass their feline housemates. But what matters most is temperament.

Adopting a dog who has already lived with cat pals can make the transition period easier. But dogs with no or unknown kitty histories need not be excluded from consideration. Many shelters and rescue groups conduct controlled introductions to evaluate their dogs' reactions to felines. "We keep the cat up on a high perch and ... the dog on a leash and watch the interaction and the body language," says Susan Reaber, behavior specialist at Animal Humane in Albuquerque, N.M. A respectful dog will give the cat a lot of space, "[doing] those doggy calming signals [like] lip licking, yawning, trying to avoid the cat, to avoid eye contact." On the other hand, a fixed stare, stiff, forward-leaning posture, or stalking behaviors tell Reaber the dog may be a poor prospect for cohabiting with a cat.

Sometimes a high-energy dog will lunge and bark but change his tune when the cat responds with hisses, growls, or swats. "A lot of these dogs will just kind of fall apart, like 'Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't

46%

of U.S. cat-owning households also have a dog

Source: American Pet Products Association's 2011-2012 National Pet Owners Survey





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mean to do that!" Reaber says. "In that case, the dog may do just fine with the cat."

Of course, the cat's personality is a factor, too. When Bella started "being a little too pushy" in her sniffing, Stinky swatted her across the nose and walked away, says Burnham-Delorey. "From that moment on I knew they were fine. The cat set the boundaries for that relationship." But Bella still wanted to chase the family's younger, more skittish cat, and "it took about six months for us to have a relatively calm house."

IT TAKES TWO TO TANGO

Careful and slow are the watchwords of successful cat-dog introductions. Before bringing your new dog home, put your kitty in a closed room with everything she needs. Allow your leashed dog to explore his new surroundings and make his initial acquaintance with his feline housemate nose-to-nose under the door. For the first few days at least, keep your dog confined whenever kitty ventures forth, and start behavior training right away to ensure you have his full attention when it comes time for face-to-face introductions.

When your furry friends are ready for a meet-and-greet, don't force the issue. One of the worst things you can do is hold your cat in your lap while allowing the dog to get close. Instead, keep your dog tightly leashed or confined to a crate and let your cat approach in her own time. And make sure kitty always has an escape route in case she's feeling threatened.

Reaber also recommends securing the dog's leash to something in the room and giving him a high value toy, such as a Kong filled with tasty treats. When purrball and pooch do share space for the first time, Reaber says, the dog won't give kitty a second thought. "The dog looks at the cat and says, 'Whatever. I have my Kong.'"

Keep in mind that even if your dog has excellent kitty manners, your cat may react badly to her new housemate. An animal behavior consultant can help with stress-related issues, and using pet gates to create dog-free zones can also reduce her anxiety. Some people still separate the pets when they're not home even after years of cohabitation, Reaber adds.

Above all, Reaber counsels patience. "Cats are on cat time. What can seem like a really long time to us may not be long at all for our cats." Expect the acclimation process to take weeks or months rather than days. "There are people who just bring the dog home, and the cat and dog are instantly best friends. But those people never call me! That's on the *Wonderful World of Disney*."



Bella and Stinky