

# Introducing a New Pet

By Diane Jarvis

A few years ago I decided it was time to add a dog to our family. So, after much discussion with the hubby as to what our kitties would think, we decided to adopt a rescued dog.

Now, my three cats have never lived with a dog. Being typical cats, they haven't felt the need for canine companionship nor have they had much patience with visiting dogs. We considered ourselves lucky to find a sweet four-year-old Lab/Basset mix, Sandy, that had lived with a cat all her life and is very respectful.

Introducing Sandy to the cats was a learning experience for all, and prompted this column. While cats and dogs often live together quite harmoniously, it works best when they are introduced properly.

Under ideal circumstances, you may be able to "audition" the new dog as I did. Given Sandy's history of living with a cat and her calm nature, I had a good idea of what to expect. She spent a few hours at my home getting to know my whole family. When we saw that she was very good natured and not at all interested in the cats, we decided to give her a try.

It is nice if you have a history on the dog you wish to adopt, but that isn't always possible. Taking them home for an audition isn't always an option either, but if you get that chance be sure you keep the dog on a leash the entire time. Good signs are cautious investigation, tail wagging, and respect for cat defensive signs. Bad signs are chasing, straining at the leash to get to the cat, barking and agitation.

Whether you audition a dog first or just adopt it and bring it home, there are some simple things to do to help the acceptance process. First and foremost, make your cat's safety a priority whenever bringing home a strange dog.

Understanding the nature of cats and dogs is a good first step. Dogs are pack animals and cats are not. The canine sense of hierarchy can work to an advantage in this case – basically, the cats are always higher in status than the dogs. Cats are turf-oriented and tend to feel more anxious or defensive when their territory (your home) is disturbed or threatened by a newcomer.

A fun-loving dog views chasing as part of play, where obviously the cat views it as a danger. Friendly dogs wag their tails, but in cat lingo a wagging tail signals hostility. Dogs that lift their paws in a gesture of playfulness look threatening to a much smaller cat.

Keeping this in mind, set the stage for introductions by being prepared. Have a "safe room" or high spot that the cat can easily retreat to when it needs privacy. Baby-gates can be helpful. Never force the animals together or restrict the cat's movements as this is stressful and possibly dangerous for you if the cat starts to claw or scratch.

Keep the dog on a leash around the cat, allowing them to set the pace. Praise the dog for behaving calmly, and give both positive attention with petting and treats. Just take care when feeding new animals and watch for any protective behavior or food aggression.

The cat may take a swipe at the dog if it gets too close. Be protective of both animals, but don't punish the cat for defending itself. One swat on the nose has never been fatal for a dog, and will help establish a hierarchy. A little growling or hissing is normal but if things get too tense separate them and try again later.

As you begin to see positive signs such as being in the same room with each other and going about normal routines of eating, sleeping and playing, you can allow the dog off leash in the cat's presence.

My cats are now back to their old routines, spoiled as ever. Sandy has settled in nicely and is even buddies with our big orange tabby, and the two of them have brought lots of laughs and love into our lives.