

Cat and dogs *can* live in harmony

By Lisa Bloch

“Human sacrifice! Dogs and cats living together! Mass hysteria!”

That line, spoken by Bill Murray in “Ghostbusters,” is still funny even though dogs and cats living together don’t portend the end of the world. In fact, it’s much more common than many think.

Many families, including my own, have felines and canines living together. You don’t have to be just “a dog person” or “a cat person.” You can be both! And in most cases, it’s easy to create a harmonious home.

But — and it’s a big but — it’s easy for things to get off on the wrong paw.

“Slow interactions and well-planned, positive interactions are crucial,” says Dawn Kovell, director of behavior and training at Marin Humane. “It can take a couple of weeks to a few months before you can safely leave your animals alone and unsupervised.”

While many cats tend to have an “I rule the roost” attitude, they’re inherently more at risk given the size and strength disparity between most dogs and cats.

Ideally, your dog should already be well-trained. Age is also a factor. If you’re introducing a kitten to an adult dog, the kitten should preferably be six months or older. Even one playful dog nip, or paw to the back, can hurt a small kitten. Confident cats with a mellow, outgoing personality generally make the best dog friends.

When first bringing home a new kitty or new dog, confine your cat to a safe room. If the cat is new, they’ll need time to adjust not only to the new territory but to you. The cat should be eating, drinking, using the litter box, and coming to you when you enter the room before any introductions begin.

Initially exposing both animals to each other’s scent will help with the face-to-face introduction. Rub a sock on each one and let the other one sniff it. Pairing this with a treat creates a positive association with the smell of the other.

Some dogs have a high prey drive meaning if something runs, they want to chase. Even if they mean no harm, this can have big consequences in terms of your cat feeling safe.

You'll need to be a keen observer and learn your dog's targeting signals. Intense staring and tracking should be interrupted and redirected; call the dog's name then praise and reward them when they look at you. You can also control your dog with tie-downs, crates, and leashes until they've learned that kitty is a member of the household now.

Start to introduce them at the door of the safe room. Have lots of treats at the ready, a bed up high on a shelf or provide a tall cat tree. With the door open, walk your dog on a leash slowly by the doorway several times each day. Praise and treat the dog for calm behavior and toss the cat a treat as well.

If your kitty isn't afraid of the dog at the doorway, the next step is to introduce them in a large room.

Your dog should be under physical control (on a leash or tie-down). Stand near your dog and give them something to do, then bring the cat in. Kitty should have access to safe spaces and these interactions should be relatively short and then gradually get longer.

"First impressions aren't always indicative of how they'll get along," says Samantha Winegarner, who's had many cats and dogs live peacefully, even lovingly, together. "The key is to manage interactions carefully and in small spurts. Patience and supervision are key."

Need more help for a harmonious household? Visit marinhumane.org/oh-behave.

Lisa Bloch is the marketing and communications director for Marin Humane which contributes Tails of Marin articles and welcomes animal-related questions and stories about the people and animals in our community. Go to marinhumane.org, find us on social media @marinhumane, or email lbloch@marinhumane.org