

Celebrating the canine-feline connection

Change the association from “chase!” to “delicious treat from human!”

■ Those who live with canine and feline companions know the old saw about “fighting like cats and dogs” just isn’t true. While some dogs can’t live safely with cats, and some cats would much prefer not to live with dogs, the majority can learn to live compatibly, even happily, with each other. Most of the time, it isn’t even difficult.

Several years ago, I brought home a tiny stray kitten. I walked into the house with the foundling in my arms. Our five dogs charged up to me in greeting, and the kitten did a classic Halloween cat imitation, complete with arched back, bottlebrush tail and alarmingly loud hissing. While four of our dogs backed off in awe, this highly arousing stimulus immediately activated our Scottish terrier’s “fierce predator” switch.

Had we introduced Viva to the dogs one at a time, with the dogs carefully restrained, she would have reacted much more calmly. Dubhy might never have posed a threat to her. However, it was too late to un-ring the bell; we would have to repair the damage.

About those terriers

To maximize your chances for harmony between species, it’s smart to select individuals who have a high likelihood for compatibility. Since terriers were originally bred to rid barns, homes and fields of unwanted rodent pests, it may be unwise to adopt a rat — or even a cat — as a pet if you’re owned by a terrier, unless you’re prepared to do a significant amount of very careful management — or you know your Jack Russell well enough to be confident he won’t present a serious risk to your new kitty.



BONNIE BAKER

There are millions of successful multi-species households in the United States, including this one.

It’s also wise to select younger, rather than older. You’re generally better off starting with a pup and raising him to know only appropriate behavior around other animals if you want him to be trustworthy around other species. It’s much more challenging — but not impossible — to change inappropriate behaviors and associations in an adult dog.

Alternatively, you can adopt an adult dog you know has a history of living gently with cats. Or vice versa. Shelters and rescues often have histories on owner-surrendered dogs and cats that tell if the pet has lived successfully in a multi-species household.

If your dog kills stray cats in your back yard, a feline family member may not be the best choice for you, especially if you intend to let your cat roam outside (not recommended!). On the

other hand, some dogs who chase cats outdoors can live safely with their own cats indoors, where cats are less likely to run and trigger the predatory response, and you are more likely to supervise dog behavior. Still, it’s a greater compatibility risk than a dog who shows no desire to chase cats.

Fortunately, we were able to manage Dubhy’s behavior with Viva until we could implement a behavior

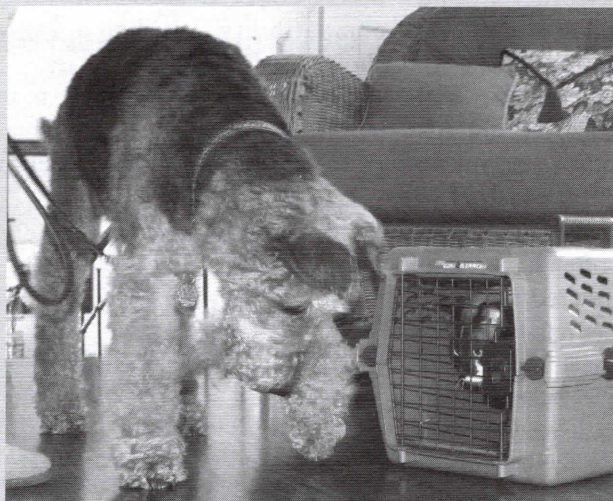
Behavior clinic offers consultations

The Animal Behavior Clinic at Cummings School offers consultations by appointment or remote service through **VETFAX** or **PETFAX**. For information: www.tufts.edu/vet/behavior.

Getting to know you one careful step at a time: An introduction may take weeks or one single session

Your chances of a successful multi-species relationship are best if you plan your introductions carefully. Here's an example of a well-orchestrated introduction. For other species, substitute the name for "cat" and figure out how to alter the process as appropriate. This process could take several weeks or occur all in one session, depending on the participants:

- Have the cat in a carrier.
- Place the carrier on the floor on the far side of the room.
- Enter with the dog on leash.
- Do classical conditioning with both dog and cat at sub-threshold distance until both offer a conditioned emotional response, a new more desirable behavior that results from a new, positive association in the presence of the other.
- Decrease the distance and repeat the process.
- When both are comfortable in close proximity, return to the original distance and remove the cat from crate, but keep him restrained, ideally on harness and leash.
- Repeat the steps until the dog and cat are comfortable in close proximity, both restrained.
- Return to original distance and release the while the dog is still restrained.
- Continue counter conditioning and desensitization with the dog on a leash as the cat moves randomly around the room until the dog shows no evidence of arousal in cat's presence.
- Release the dog from the leash, supervising carefully until you're confident the dog won't chase the cat.



BONNIE BAKER

What not to do: Let the dog advance on the cat in a crate. You'll have one stressed cat.

modification program. Dubhy and now 4-year-old Viva are fast friends these days, and we've added two more cats to the family.

Good management requires effective barriers (doors, baby gates), sturdy containment (crates, pens), restraint (leashes, tethers) and unwavering supervision to keep potential combatants safely separated. If your housemates aren't good at keeping doors and gates closed, or if your talented dog can open doors, you can add self-closing springs, child-proof latches and/or padlocks to your management tools.

After taking emergency management precautions with our new kitten (keeping her in a spare bedroom with the door securely closed), I set to work on a counter-conditioning program: feeding high-value treats non-stop when Viva was in Dubhy's presence, quietly restraining him if he lunged at her. By the end of the first session, Dubhy was lying at my feet, not taking his eyes off the kitten and happily munching tidbits of boiled chicken.

The rapid progress continued over the next few daily sessions. There were tears in my eyes at the conclusion of Session 5 as I watched Dubhy and Viva lying together on the sofa. Even when she raced across the room, a sure trigger for a predatory chase, Dubhy controlled himself — I didn't have to say a word. He jerked forward as if to take off after her, then thought better of it, settled back onto his blanket and looked at me. And yes, he got a big chicken jackpot! We continued close supervision and management long after Dubhy stopped showing any desire to chase until Viva was 6 months old and better able to protect herself, if necessary. It never was.

Add basic good manners training to counter conditioning, and you're even further ahead. The better the communication between you and your dog,

Changing his emotional response works better than yelling at him to stop menacing the cat

Changing the dog's emotional response is a more effective way to modify his behavior than yelling at him to stop chasing the cat. When his emotions are under control, he can sit or come when you ask him.

I use counter conditioning and desensitization (CC&D) a lot in my work and home because I can successfully apply it to an almost endless number of behavior challenges. All living things — at least those with a central nervous system — learn and respond to their environment through operant conditioning and classical conditioning. Here's how they work.

Operant conditioning: By definition, with operant conditioning, the dog operates on the environment. He acts deliberately to make good stuff happen and bad stuff go away. Your dog chooses to offer a sit because he knows there's a good chance you'll give him attention and perhaps a tasty treat.

Counter conditioning: Counter conditioning is changing an already-established response by giving it a different, usually more positive association. Desensitization exposes a dog to an aversive stimulus at low intensity (sub-threshold) at first and gradually increases its intensity until the dog no longer finds it aversive. Used together, they provide an effective way to change his behavior.

If we replace the "cat equals rousing game of chase" association with "cat equals delicious treat from human" association, we have "countered" the prior association with the new one, and we get a new classically conditioned response. "Look at human for chicken"

rather than "chase the cat."

Classical conditioning: With classical conditioning, the environment operates on the dog; a stimulus triggers a response as a result of an earlier experience. For example, your dog hears the "Click!" of the clicker and starts to salivate because he's made the association between the Click! and the arrival of a yummy morsel. He doesn't have to think, doesn't have to decide to salivate — it just happens. He also wags his tail and gets happy — automatic responses because of his association between Click! and treat.

Let's consider Dubhy's and Lucy's undesirable cat chasing behavior. A dog's desire to chase is an innate — hardwired. It doesn't have to be learned. It's stronger in some dogs than others due to genetics and environmental reinforcement. We purposely breed some dogs to be more turned on by movement; herding dogs (Lucy), terriers (Dubhy) and sighthounds leap to mind.

Chasing something specific — a cat, a ball, a flying disc — is learned. The association between the cat's presence and the dog's experience that cats often run away makes cats a classically conditioned high-arousal chase object.

It's important to keep in mind that classical and operant conditioning are both happening all the time. However, when your dog has a strong emotional response — high arousal, fear, great excitement — operant conditioning goes by the wayside. When your dog barks and lunges at your cat, he's unable to respond to your cues to come or lie down. He's so aroused he can't

think clearly enough to register and respond to your cue. That's why changing the dog's emotional response is a much more effective way to modify his behavior than yelling at him to stop chasing the cat. When his emotions are under control, he can sit or come when you ask him.

The sequence of events most likely to produce effective counter conditioning is this:

1. The stimulus — the cat — appears at a sub-threshold distance, the distance at which the dog sees the cat, becomes alert but doesn't start barking and lunging.
2. The owner feeds bits of high value treats to the dog as long as the cat is in view near the threshold distance.
3. The cat disappears from view.
4. The owner stops feeding.

Repeat these steps until, when the cat appears, your dog looks at you with a big "Where's my chicken?" grin on his face. We call this a conditioned emotional response, or CER. When you have a consistent CER at your starting distance, decrease the distance slightly and repeat Steps 1-4. Every time you obtain consistent CERs you can increase the intensity of the stimulus — bring the cat closer, introduce two cats or have the cat move a little faster by having someone else call the cat or shake a can of kitty treats.

Done well, you end up with dog and cat — or chinchilla, parrot, snake, tarantula — living safely together like Dubhy and Viva.

— Pat Miller

the more reliably he'll respond when the need arises. Lucy, our Cardigan corgi, is also fond of chasing cats, albeit from the herding dog "wheeeeeeee, it's fun to chase and round up things that move" perspective rather from a "chase and kill" motivation. Counter conditioning worked for her as well, but while Dubhy has completely given up

any "kill" association with Viva, Lucy still yearns to chase our cats when they move. Her well-practiced "leave-it," "come" and "down" cues give us an added layer of insulation against tormenting the cat.

There are millions of successful multi-species households, so chances are good that if you put your mind to it,

you're likely to turn your home into a peaceable kingdom, where lions lie down with lambs — or at least cats and dogs can live peacefully together. ■

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