

Felines and Canines and Chaos! Oh My!

Written by Janet Goodman, BT Contributor
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With a little intervention, worst fears don't have to come true

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Dogs and cats don't always get along, but when they do, it can be a bit of heaven.

We've all seen those viral videos: a Rottweiler nursing orphan kittens; a pit bull playing with an orange tabby; cats riding like bareback acrobats atop an unaware Old English Mastiff.

These are feel-good, "Kumbaya" moments we all secretly long for. Well, at least those of us who own both dogs and cats. It's the stuff that proves the naysayers wrong: that the two species really can live under one roof in peace. We pin our hopes on a Garfield and Odie kind of relationship, while wishing away the Sylvester and Spike rivalry.

According to a 2012 survey by the American Pet Products Association (APPA), more households with pets than ever -- 40 percent -- own multiple types of pets, and 29 percent of these own a dog and a cat.

For some of us, this dog-plus-cat home life has hellish moments -- and it's not just pet aggression issues that fan the flames. Other unwanted behaviors between these two species can make us long to own only one, and that kind of hopelessness fills our animal shelters with unwanted pets. There are better solutions.

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Take, for example, the Persistently Empty Litter Box Syndrome. Most homes with indoor cats and dogs have suffered from this condition at one time or another. For the uninitiated, this is where even the most regal of dogs plunders the litter box of cat feces. Proof is in the sand-covered muzzle that greets us at the front door or dog breath that is beyond the smelly pale. A quick fix is to switch over to a hooded, igloo-style box, place it in a corner of the room, and turn the opening so that it's facing the wall. Cats get in and most dogs stay out.

Actual *real* food, like cat kibble, can present a different problem. Dogs love to sneak cat food, but over the long term, the high protein content can lead to kidney and liver failure. Feline edibles are balanced for feline systems, not those of canines. Also, cats that eat less of their own food will become deficient in taurine (which dogs make themselves) and arachidonic acid, which is a fatty acid not needed in dog diets.

Bottom line: It's important to keep the bowls separated. Most dogs finish their meals once the bowl is offered, but cats go back to the bowl and nibble throughout the day. Keeping the cat bowl in a high, unapproachable place like a counter top is a good idea.

Certain toys manufactured for cats can be dangerous around dogs. Small balls and furry mice toys can be easily ingested, leading to intestinal blockages, or can become lodged in the trachea, causing suffocation. For families with dogs and cats, cat toys are more safely used with human supervision. Beware of toys stuffed with catnip. They cause rather frisky cat behavior that can provoke friction between the two species.

In a perfect world, a pet owner would have puppies and kittens grow up together, which improves the chances of the animals getting along. Sometimes, though, life can't be planned for perfection. Introductions are important and should be done on neutral territory, with dogs controlled on a leash and things kept as underwhelming as possible -- one introduction at a time for large packs. Cats should always be given a high escape route; otherwise they'll run up the nearest person, who may find 20 claws imbedded in her scalp (don't ask me how I know).

For those times when human supervision isn't possible (at bedtime or at work), I like to see dogs separated from their new feline family -- at least until the owner is absolutely certain of a calm relationship. Kennel crates are preferred, but sometimes a closed-off room will suffice for older dogs. This individual downtime is a tremendous de-stresser for both dogs and cats; it's a

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time to rest and feel safe.

Most dogs have some amount of prey instinct -- the natural desire to pursue. This can be the biggest cause of despair for someone whose dog loves to chase cats. Playing tug or fetch can provide a positive outlet for this need, and regular play sessions should be considered essential therapy. The exercise can take the heat out of the urge to run after a cat.

Years ago at my kennel in Largo, a friendly feral tabby named Light Kitty would amble up and sit close by during dog-training sessions. Teaching commands in the presence of cats is a powerful tool that can be used to defuse negative dog-cat interactions. Consistent, controlled exposure is the way to arrive at a bigger slice of heaven at home.

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