

# Fear of Other Pets

By Karen Sueda, DVM

## Why is my cat fearful of my other pets?

**Fear of other cats.** If your fearful cat did not grow up with other cats, he may not be used to interacting with others of his species and may not recognize your other cats' overtures of friendship. In addition, like dogs, cats have a hierarchy, though it is more complex. A more dominant or confident cat in your household may be sending your fearful cat a subtle message to "stay out of my way." This message can be communicated with a stare, by blocking certain pathways in your home, or by making one's presence very obvious (e.g., lying outstretched in the middle of the living room). Your fearful cat gets the message and goes out of his way to avoid conflict.



**Fear of dogs.** Cats have good reason to be fearful of dogs, since most dogs are bigger than cats and smell like a predator. And, of course, many dogs instinctually chase fast-moving objects that are smaller than they are. Understandably, this is a very scary experience for a cat; he may learn to avoid your dog after even one negative experience. Even if your dog has never chased a cat, she still smells and looks like a dog to your cat. If your cat was not exposed to dogs at a young age, he may be more apprehensive of them.

## How can I make my cat more comfortable around my other pets?

One way is to use the behavior modification techniques called desensitization and counter-conditioning. (Please refer to the resource called "Using Behavior Modification to Help Your Cat" for general information about these training techniques.)

Before you start the exercises, you should provide safe areas for your fearful cat to retreat to if she is chased or otherwise intimidated by other pets. Clear off some bookshelves or add cat trees to your home so she can jump to an elevated, protected area. Adding skirts around tables or chairs also creates hiding places for your cat to feel safe. A low-tech alternative is to provide cardboard boxes with two holes cut out of them; the second hole allows your cat to escape if another cat jumps in. Place baby gates in doorways – cats can jump over them or squeeze through them if a dog is in hot pursuit. You can also buy cat collars that signal a cat door to open, which limits access to a room to only the cat wearing the collar.

You should also provide a "house of plenty" so your fearful cat does not have to compete with other pets for food, water, toys, or attention from you. Confident, dominant cats often "guard" these resources by sitting or standing near them, preventing your fearful cat from approaching. To counteract this, place food dishes, water dishes and litter boxes in several locations in your home. You can also put them in protected areas, such as on top of counters.

## How do I use behavior modification to make my cat less fearful?

You will gradually get your cat used to the presence of other pets by starting with a “safe” distance and then gradually moving your pet closer. Over multiple sessions, you will gradually decrease the distance between your cat and your other pets until your fearful cat is able to remain relaxed in their presence. To do the exercises, you’ll need treats, toys or other rewards for your cat, and you will also need control over your other pet(s). This may entail asking your dog to “down-stay” or keeping your more confident cat occupied with a bowl of food while you work with your fearful cat. Alternatives are to tether your dog or put your other cat behind a baby gate or screen door. Once you’ve worked out these details, follow these steps:

**1. Find a starting distance.** The exercises begin at the distance at which your cat does not exhibit any sign of anxiety, arousal or aggression toward your other pet (while they are relatively stationary). Your fearful cat should appear completely calm and feel safe at this distance. The actual distance will depend on your cat’s temperament and the behavior of your other pet. For example, the starting distance between a very timid cat and a rambunctious young dog barking at him may be larger than the starting distance between a bolder cat and an older, inactive dog lying still. If you have a very fearful cat or if your other pet is aggressive, difficult to manage or over-active, you may need to start with each pet in different rooms with the door between them closed. You can work through a closed door.

**2. Start behavior modification.** Place your fearful cat at the starting distance. Watch your cat’s behavior and body language very closely. As long as he remains calm and non-anxious, reward this behavior with treats (e.g., a plate of canned food), play or petting. Continue this activity for a few minutes, then end the session with a reward. You can provide your other pet with a plate of food or a treat to keep her occupied during this exercise as well.

**3. Decrease the distance.** Do several sessions at the starting distance. After several sessions, you will notice your cat becoming more accustomed to the presence of your other pet. The next step is to decrease the distance between your cat and your other pet by a few inches. To do this, move your cat’s bowl of food or lure your cat closer with a treat or toy. Watch your cat closely for any signs of anxiety. If he remains calm, repeat the session a few times. Then, over many sessions, gradually and incrementally decrease the distance between your cat and your other pet.

**4. If your cat becomes anxious.** If you notice your cat displaying signs of anxiety, move him further away from your other pet until he is no longer fearful. At this distance, reward the calm behavior to end the session on a positive note. During the next session, start at this “safe” distance. When you start to decrease the distance, do so in smaller increments than you did before.

**5. Add movement to the mix.** Once your cat is comfortable eating or playing near your other pet when they are seated or eating, you can repeat these exercises while adding in the element of movement. To add in movement, repeat step one, finding a starting distance at which your cat remains calm or distracted by toys or treats. Rather than

having your dog in a down-stay or your bolder cat eating out of a dish, ask a friend or family member to walk your dog back and forth on a leash or to play with your other cat at a distance. The starting distance for a moving pet may not be the same as a stationary one. This time, with your other pet moving, repeat steps two through four.

Other movements, such as having the other pet walk toward your cat, can be desensitized in the same manner. Your cat's ability to generalize and display calm behavior around a variety of situations will depend on how often you can repeat these exercises and add in different elements.

Try to keep in mind that these exercises take time, and progress may be slow. It may not be reasonable to expect your cat to remain calm if confronted by a barking dog or another cat pouncing on him or staring at him. Just remember that, overall, your efforts are helping to improve your cat's quality of life. In some cases, anti-anxiety medication may help to facilitate behavior modification. If you have questions about desensitization and counter-conditioning exercises or how to apply them to your cat, please consult with your veterinarian or a veterinary behaviorist.

*Karen Sueda is a veterinary behavior resident at the University of California at Davis School of Veterinary Medicine, Clinical Animal Behavior Service.*

See also: [Using Behavior Modification to Help Your Cat](#)