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Ask the Vet: Take action to aid relationships among pets

Q: We found a dog along the road that was starving and hurt. We provided medical care for him, and he has turned out to be a very nice terrier. Unfortunately, our two cats are not adjusting well — the dog likes to chase the cats, and now our usually shy one stays mostly hidden and she doesn't interact much with us anymore. Aside from finding the dog a new home, what options exist to help everyone get along better?

A: Sorry to hear about the new tensions in your home. Sometimes pets get along quite well from the very beginning, but more commonly it takes time for new relationships to develop and for pets to become familiar with one another.

Personalities and personal interests vary among individual pets, just like in people. Here are some tips that I hope will help you.

For your new dog, it sounds like the allure of playing with his new feline “toys” is very strong. Do not reprimand or punish him for chasing the cats, as this response might actually be considered encouraging from the dog's point of view. What we people assume to be understood as negative and associated with a behavior, a dog may interpret differently.

A better action is to redirect his focus away from the cats to something much more interesting. This often involves an interactive toy, with irresistible treats or food inside. There are a variety of behavior modification toys available for this purpose.

In order to change your dog's attention from the cats to the toy, your dog must know that the toy is really great. You can feed all your dog's meals using specially designed toys, which will provide both entertainment and mental stimulation for him.

It works best to divide a measured daily volume of food into many small portions that are offered in the interactive toys throughout the day.

Equally important is to make sure that the dog is getting plenty of exercise; not just tossing a ball around the living room but outdoor activities like long walks or runs if possible. If he is physically tired, he will likely be less interested in chasing the cats — or at least less intensely.

Also, there are several specific training techniques for teaching relaxation and calming which may be beneficial in your situation. For a well-trained dog, we expect to be able to stop behavior that is undesirable.

Your training teaches the dog that your rewards are higher value than chasing the cats. This ideal situation takes patience and dedication to training. Your veterinarian can help guide you to resources that will help.

For the cat that is scared and staying hidden, you need to make sure she has a dog-free zone so she does not continuously feel threatened.

All cats need some daily friendly contact, so if she is not coming to you on her own, then you need to meet with her where she feels safe. Set aside time every day, close the door so she feels safer, and specifically interact with her. This may involve toys, treats, brushing or just some relaxing lap time. This one-on-one interactive time is necessary to help decrease stress, and to help her feel safe.

Chronic stress in cats has been known to increase risk for cystitis, dermatologic problems and both anorexia and obesity.

Additionally, there are products available for both cats and dogs that improve their feelings of security and relaxation, and help to provide calming.

Products containing pheromones often have anti-anxiety benefits and are helpful in these situations. Your veterinarian will be able to give you some more specific product information.

Generally, most multi-pet relationships improve over time. This process can sometimes take weeks or months, so hang in there.

With training techniques for the dog and socialization for the cats, consistency from you is most important for success.