

Dogs and Cats in Harmony

©2002 Canine College of California

Most dogs can be taught to tolerate cats if their owners are willing to be patient and consistent. Some dogs take longer to train than others and the difference is usually due to the dog's level of "prey drive".

Nature designed canines to be predators — to chase and catch smaller animals for food. Although dogs have been domesticated for thousands of years, they still act upon the instincts nature gave them. Through generations of selective breeding, people have modified these instincts. By decreasing the effects of some and enhancing the effects of others, we've been able to develop a wide variety of different breeds of dogs, each meant to serve a different purpose or perform a certain function.

There are several effective ways to train a dog with a high prey drive to live peacefully with cats or other small pets. I prefer to teach these dogs that cats are off limits altogether and are not to be disturbed. Using a friend or family member to help you, set up several short daily training sessions.

1. With the dog wearing a training collar and leash, put him on a sit/stay beside you. Have your friend hold the cat on the other side of the room. Your dog will probably be very curious and even excited at seeing the cat, but insist that he remain in the sit/stay position. Praise your dog for sitting calmly.
2. Have your friend bring the cat a few steps closer. If your dog continues to stay quietly at your side, wonderful! Praise him for it. If he tries to lunge at the cat, though, give him a stern, fierce-sounding "NO! LEAVE IT!" along with a short, sharp jerk on the lead and put him back in the sit-stay position. As soon as he is sitting calmly again, praise him sincerely. Continue bringing the cat closer, a few feet at a time, repeating the corrections as needed and making sure to praise the dog when he sits quietly and ignores the cat. Have patience — depending on the intensity of your dog, you might only be able to gain a few feet each session.
3. When your dog is able to sit calmly even when the cat is right next to him, you're ready to proceed to the next step. Release the dog from his sit/stay and let him walk around the room with the cat present. Leave his lead on so you can easily catch him and give the necessary correction if he gives any sign of wanting to chase the cat. Your supervision at this point is critical - to be effective, you must be able to correct the dog each and every time he even thinks about going after the cat. If he's allowed to chase her, even once, he'll want to try it again and you'll have to start your training over from the beginning.

Some dogs learn quickly, others may take weeks to become trustworthy around cats. Until you're sure the dog will remember his training, don't leave them together unsupervised!

- You can also combine a dog crate/cat crate with the "LEAVE IT!" command to help introduce cats and dogs. Sometimes the dog is crated

with the cat free in the room, at other times, the cat is crated while the dog was free. The dog should be allowed to investigate the cat but not to harass or bark at it.

- By giving the dog extra attention and even special treats when the is in the room, the dog soon learns that having the cat around means very good things are going to happen to him!