

TALES FROM A DOG BEHAVIOURIST:

Chasing cats

Dogs and cats have long been portrayed as natural enemies, and this may be the case if cats and dogs are not raised together, or introduced, correctly. The most common problem experienced by owners of both species is dogs chasing cats. This can be very stressful for cats, who do not handle environmental stress easily, and they may develop behavioural problems in response or even run away. It may also be potentially dangerous in that dogs can become aggressive during the excitement of the chase and hurt a cat, and a cat that feels threatened may attack a dog and can easily do serious damage, especially to eyes.

Some breeds, such as those in the sighthound and terrier groups, are more likely to chase cats than others. This is simply because they have been bred to hunt small animals, and the sight of a running cat triggers their instincts. Dogs that are not sufficiently exercised or stimulated are also more likely to chase cats in order to fulfil those needs.

Ideally, puppies should be raised with cats and taught early on to respect them. This isn't always possible though, and if you adopt an older dog that hasn't been socialised with cats or only get cats when your pup is grown, then there are ways of approaching this problem.

It is always important to establish a strict hierarchy with your dogs, with you as leader. This is the first step in getting your dog to respect cats because they will be more likely to follow your lead and listen to your instruction. Added to this, you will be in the position to decide the hierarchy between the dogs and cats: cats should always have a higher pack status than dogs.

Dogs cannot be punished after they have chased a cat – this will just confuse them and create anxiety and fear. Dogs should be disciplined when caught in the act. If you witness your dog chasing a cat, it is best to try and distract them from the activity. So try and call them to you, with a treat as a reward if necessary. This can create a positive association with not chasing cats. If this doesn't work, invest in a water pistol for discipline at a distance: spraying the dog once or twice should get their attention. The goal is to distract them; not to punish.

The rest of the time, dogs should be made to respect a cat's space and resources. This means that dogs must not have access to the cat's food or water bowls. Dogs must not be allowed to invade a cat's sleeping area. Litter trays are also a taboo area for dogs, especially when the cat is using them!

The most important aspect of attempting to modify any canine behaviour is exercise. Walking a dog on a daily basis helps to drain the energy that is usually directed into negative behaviours. A dog that is tired and mentally stimulated by walking will be far less likely to chase a cat.

Cats and dogs do not necessarily have to be enemies; they can be the best of friends. It's up to you, the pack leader, to ensure harmony between the different species of your pack. However, if canine-feline relations are reaching a critical point in your household, speak to a professional for advice.



Juno and Saxon – the best of friends.

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