

# Pawsitive Press

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## New Pet 101

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It's the holiday season again, a time of year when many families welcome new pets into their households. If this is you, congratulations on your new addition! Pets provide unconditional love and companionship, and you are on your way to having one of the most meaningful relationships of your life. However, having a pet is not just a one-way street. Pets require just as much love and attention as they provide, and there is a lot you need to know to be a good pet parent. We could fill hundreds of pages on the topic for sure, but here are 10 tips to get you started.

**1.** Most importantly, take your new pet to the veterinarian within 2 days of adoption. Because of the sheer volume, shelters are sometimes unable to provide the comprehensive veterinary care needed, and pets from breeders may or may not have been seen by a vet. Your veterinarian will provide a comprehensive exam, schedule any remaining vaccinations, perform diagnostic tests (such as feline leukemia testing and fecal screening), address any medical concerns, suggest an appropriate diet for your pet, microchip your pet, provide heartworm, flea, and tick (if needed for your area) prevention, and discuss training and/or behavioral



concerns. If your pet is not spayed/neutered, your vet will discuss the best time for this.

**2.** Give the pet at least a week to get used to his new environment. For dogs, this means waiting a week before introducing him to dog parks, neighborhood pets, and lots of other people. Rather than giving them access to the entire house initially, keep them in a small room with a baby gate, especially one with hard floors that allow for easy clean-up; the stress of a new home can lead to a lapse in potty training. Crate-training is beyond the scope of this article, but including a crate in this room is highly recommended, as it can provide the dog with a safe place to go and can help with potty training. Also, be sure to provide a variety of toys for entertainment and chewing. Kong toys with frozen peanut butter, pumpkin, or broth provide hours of fun!

For a new cat, it's very important to give them a safe space away from other pets, children, and

household clamor, where they can access food, water, and a litter box without disruption by other two- or four-legged family members. Don't force contact with a cat; let them come to you. Cats are naturally curious creatures and will definitely emerge to investigate once they feel comfortable. Forcing interaction prior to this, when a cat is still feeling unsure of themselves, can create negative associations.

Dogs can be introduced right away to other household pets – see below for instructions. Wait a week on cats, as the introduction will go far more smoothly if they are comfortable in their surroundings.



**3.** Potty train! Some pets come with good house or litter-box training, but even in these pets, reinforcement in a new environment is crucial. First and foremost, consistency is key. Establish a feeding schedule and pick up the dish 10-15 minutes after putting it down. Take your new puppy outside first thing in the morning, immediately after meals, and then hourly throughout the day, and just before bedtime. Always go to the same place and say the same command. Give them a chance to sniff around before they go; it may take them a

## **New Pet 101 Cont'd**

little while to figure out what is expected. Shower him with praise and/or treats when he goes. If he doesn't go, keep him in a crate or under direct supervision, and try again in 15 minutes. Once your new pet learns the routine, you will be able to gradually decrease the number of trips outside and increase his freedom in the house.

For cats, provide one more litter box than the number of cats. Once placed in the box, most kittens will use it, but you may have to make a practice of placing a new kitty in their box after eating, and hourly thereafter, until they get the hang of it. If they don't scratch right away, you can move one of their paws in a scratching motion to get them started.

**4.** Don't compromise on diet, and ask your vet for recommendations! Some foods have attractive claims and packaging, but not such attractive ingredients. In general, it is good practice to avoid artificial colors/flavors and preservatives, but your vet will be able to give you names of brands that use more quality ingredients. The higher quality foods will be found at pet stores vs. the grocery store. If your new pet is a puppy or kitten, it is very important that they be fed puppy and kitten-specific food; the dietary needs of growing animals are different than those of adults! Also, puppies and kittens are more likely to develop low blood sugar, so it's important to feed them more frequently than adults. As a general rule, pets between 6 weeks and 3 months old should be fed four times daily. From 3-6 months of age, pets should be fed three times daily. After 6 months, you can switch to twice daily feedings. The transition to adult food usually occurs around 1 year, but this can differ by breed and when the animal was spayed or neutered, so be sure to check

with your vet. Feed the amount specified on the bag for your pet's weight. Always measure! This way, if your pet is too heavy or too thin, adjustments can easily be made.



**5.** Brush teeth! Dental disease is one of the most frequent health problems encountered in pets today, and it can cause a whole host of problems not limited to the mouth. For example, presence of chronic inflammation in the mouth from heavy dental tartar can make pets more susceptible to many chronic diseases, from diabetes to cancer. Brushing teeth requires some patience and training, and it's easiest if you start early. Start with a small amount of pet-specific enzymatic toothpaste on your finger and gently rub the teeth and gums. Reward your pet with praise and treats for staying still and allowing you to do this. Gradually increase the time of each session, and if you can, transition to a toothbrush. Make sure not to neglect that premolars and molars in the back of the mouth! Toothpaste for pets can be purchased at your vet's office or a pet store.



**6.** Supervise all interactions of your new pet with children. Teach children gentle handling techniques. There are some good books out there that illustrate this very well. My favorites are "Tails Are Not for Pulling," by Elizabeth Verdick and "May I Pet Your Dog?" by Stephanie Calmenson. As a quick synopsis, here are some things to avoid with children: taking food or

or toys from a dog (cats usually don't mind, but it's good practice to avoid this overall), close face-to-face contact, grabbing the tail or ears, bothering sleeping animals, hugging animals tightly or picking them up.

**7.** Pet-proof the house and yard.

Pets are like children, especially puppies and kittens, they can get into everything! Remove any small items that can be choked on – including toys or bones that have been chewed to small fragments, toxic household cleaners, rodent/insect traps, and poisonous plants. If you are uncertain about the toxicity of your plants, you can look them up at the ASPCA animal poison control web site:

<https://www.asPCA.org/pet-care/animal-poison-control/toxic-and-non-toxic-plants>.



Also note that cats, in particular, love to play with string. String can be extremely hazardous to cats, because it can get stuck under the tongue, and then, when swallowed, pulls on the small intestine. So, remove all yarn, thread, ribbon, etc., from the reach of your kitty. Cats also love to get inside washers and dryers, so be sure to keep these closed, as well. Note that some pets are very clever and get can into closed cabinets. Consider child safety locks for cabinets containing poisonous materials.

**8.** Develop a "vocabulary list" and be consistent. If you want a pet to learn to lie down, use the restroom, or walk properly on a leash, consistency and positive reinforcement are key. While training is outside the scope of this article, keep in mind that having one word that is

consistently used for each command, is the way to go.

9. Have emergency numbers available! Keep the phone number and address of your veterinarian, the nearest emergency veterinarian, and poison control on your refrigerator. The number for the ASPCA Pet Poison Control Center is (888) 426-4435.
10. First impressions matter; short, positive interactions are the key to long-term bliss.



- a. For dogs, introduce the new family member to their prospective sibling on neutral territory, like a neighbor's lawn or a park. Do not start with nose-to-nose contact; this may be perceived as threatening. Start with a walk in which the dogs have about 10 feet between them. If this goes well, allow them to make contact with each other still on leash. Give them a few minutes to sniff, then drop the leashes and allow them to investigate each other and even play for a few minutes. Keep the session short; this affords a higher probability of avoiding a tussle and keeping the mood positive. Once the dogs have had a few positive sessions, it's time to have a meeting in the home. First, remove any food bowls or toys from the area that may incite conflict. Next, let the 2 dogs meet on leash in the resident dog's yard. If the interaction is positive, let the new dog go into the home before the resident dog, so the resident

dog doesn't feel he has to defend his turf! Most dogs will do quite well with this.

- b. Cats are trickier, as they are inherently solitary beings, so a lot more patience is required to introduce them. Upon arrival of the new cat, keep him in a separate room for at least a week, while they adjust to their new environment. After a week, feed the new cat and the resident cat on either side of the door to the new cat's room, so they associate something positive with each other's scent. Start with the dishes a few feet away from the door (on either side), and then gradually move the dishes closer to the door until they are touching the door, over the course of a few days. During this time, expose each cat to items that smell like the other. Once they are comfortable with the above, open the door between the two rooms and allow the cats to interact. Observe them closely for signs of aggression and, if seen, separate them, and then restart the introduction process in a few days. If the interaction is friendly, bring both cats into opposite sides of a large room, with toys, treats, or catnip. Again, observe them for signs of aggression, and discontinue the interaction immediately if seen. If the interaction is positive, again, keep it short and sweet.



- c. When introducing a cat to a dog or a dog to a cat, start as

you would with the cat introduction, but instead of opening the door, place a baby gate across the door, so the cat can escape. Note that some dogs, especially those with strong prey drive, cannot ever be safely placed with cats.

- d. After regular short, positive interactions, your family of dogs and cats can be allowed to be together in the house under direct supervision. Until at least a few months of positive interactions, separate them when you leave the house, as their increase anxiety during this time makes negative interactions more likely. If you have a combination of dogs and cats, always give the cat(s) a safe place to escape from the dog(s), whether under direction supervision or not!



Now that you are armed with tips, enjoy your new family member! We look forward to meeting him/her!



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