

How to Manage a Fear Free® Return Home



You may have noticed that when you bring one pet home from the veterinarian or groomer, your other pets give the “returnee” the cold shoulder, acting as if they don’t know them. Worse, they may react negatively, even aggressively. That’s because the pet may smell or look different, especially if they have been shaved or had a surgical procedure, causing fear and anxiety in your other pets. Here are some tips to help prevent a negative reintroduction when returning home with a pet.

Assume it might not go well, and set your pets up for success. A negative reintroduction results in a long-lasting negative memory. There have been cases of cats no longer being able to live together after a reunion went badly. The time and financial commitment sometimes required to repair the relationship between pets can be prohibitive for some.

Manage the situation by controlling the reintroduction. Control the reintroduction by managing the other pets on leash, restricting them to another room, or keeping them behind a baby gate or exercise pen or inside their crate (if the pets are crate trained). This prevents the other pets from rushing up to the returning pet.

Provide a safe haven. If your pet was sedated or had any procedures performed that may not make them feel 100 percent, provide them with a safe and comfortable place to relax without the other pets around. This might be in a crate, exercise pen, or special room. Once your pet is back to themselves, you can implement a controlled reintroduction to the household.

Mix their scents. Smell is so important to our pets. Cats, especially, seem to recognize each other by scent. Cats and dogs can be sensitive to unfamiliar smells, such as antiseptics or grooming products. Work to familiarize them with each other’s scents by allowing them to sniff each other through the space beneath a closed door. You can also artificially mix their scents. To do this, take a dry face cloth and allow your cat or dog to rub on it or pet them with it gently. Take the same cloth to all pets in the house and repeat. Leave the cloth out in the environment to let them get used to each other’s scents. Calming pheromones may also be helpful in promoting a harmonious reintroduction.

Take a walk. If appropriate, take the dogs for a walk together. The distraction of doing a normal activity together on neutral territory can help re-establish their familiarity with each other. Ideally, each dog should be walked by a different person.

It’s a party! Cats can be distracted with a play session or special meal for each cat at a distance from each other. Dogs can be distracted by asking for known cues or tricks and reinforcing those with small treats.

The three-second rule. It is normal for your other pets to want to smell the returning pet who is bringing back unique odors. Prolonged sniffing can make your pet uncomfortable. Introduce and enforce the three-second rule. If sniffing last for more than three seconds, calmly get your pets’ attention by gently clapping your hands or saying their names in an upbeat tone. Keep it calm and avoid creating tension. Call them away to get a toy or follow you to the treat jar.

If you notice excessive interest in the returning pet or body language indicators of fear, anxiety, or stress, such as freezing, walking slowly, hiding, lifted lip, growling, or hissing, to name just a few, separate your pets and work on a more gradual introduction.

Follow these tips and you will be back to normal before you know it. How quickly the reintroduction takes depends on the individual animals and the circumstances. Some pets take just a few minutes to resume a normal relationship. Others might take hours or even a day or two to put out the welcome mat.



If you are having trouble with reintroductions, ask your Fear Free Certified® Veterinarian to recommend someone who can assist you.