The Blended Pet Family
by Heather Reimer
Nov. 2007

Talk show host Ellen DeGeneres tearfully told her TV audience last week about a dog she adopted and had to give up because he didn't get along with her cats.

It's tough having to surrender a pet, even a recent arrival. If you're thinking about bringing an animal into your home but aren't sure if your other pets will accept him or her, there are things you can do to make the transition easier and increase the chances of long-term peace in your home.

First of all, be aware that most pet stores have an "all sales final" policy, but shelters and rescues tend to have a more relaxed attitude about accepting pet returns if the adoption doesn't work out (in fact, some require it). So be sure to ask lots of questions and read the fine print before buying or adopting.

Be realistic about your blended family. Your older pet may never fully accept the newer cat or dog. Sometimes mutual tolerance is the most you can hope for.

Introduce them slowly. Confine the new pet to his or her own room for the first week or so with food, water and litter box. Feed both animals on either side of the door so they begin to associate the pleasure of eating with the scent of each other. During this time, also trade their bedding.

Then allow the new pet to explore the house for brief periods while the other is confined. That way, he can get used to the surroundings without fear.

Over the next few days, let them see each other through a crack in the door while supervised. Minor protests are okay but any sign of fear or aggression has to be nipped in the bud or it can become a habit that's hard to change. If you see aggression, start the process over.

This method also works for introducing a cat to a dog but needs more supervision and caution.

If your blended family still has problems, seek professional advice from a veterinarian. Sometimes medication is prescribed as a last resort to help ease the tensions.

Heather Reimer is the founder of the Virden Pet Network, a free online pet listing service.