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Socializing for your cat

It is fun to sit in the park on a sunny day and watch the neighborhood children congregate around a large sand box or wading pool. Two or three will play, one more will appear and then another. It is interesting to see the different personalities and watch how they integrate with each other. Some are too independent to join in, others are too shy. Still others, will rush up to strange children and right away take them by the hand and lead them to the slide to play.

When I observe animals interacting with each other, I can't help noticing all the ways in which their behavior is similar to that of humans. All animals have

personality traits that make them who they are. In my work at my cageless cat kennel, I have met hundreds of cats over the past six years. I find it interesting to note that when discussing cats, their fur color, their sex and the length of their hair can be extremely informative and can provide us with remarkable insight into their distinct personalities. The extremely shy or cranky cats that people bring to me significantly benefit from their experience.

Just as all humans benefit from socialization, all cats can benefit too. I am especially pleased to see particular colors of cats enter my group boarding environment. For example, the majority of female calico cats and female dark tabbies (stripped) typically have a bit of attitude. They can be cranky or bossy some of the time, and friendly and social the rest of the time. They are unpredictable. The solid black cats,

male or female, seem equally split. They are either complete social extroverts, or they have a fair bit of attitude. A small percentage of the solid black cats can be extremely shy and they will hide for most of their day.

Female short-haired grey and white tabbies have unique personalities all their own. Most of them I describe as being 'a little bit wild', even if they are completely domesticated. This doesn't usually apply to the male grey and white tabbies. They can be very friendly, laid back and social. A small portion of the male grey and whites I refer to as 'stalkers'. They seem fearless around people and other animals, even if they are a quarter of their size. They are the only color that I have seen acting that way, and unfortunately, they don't lose that personality trait with age. Left unsocialized, they tend to amplify it.

Due to the fact that my kennel is completely cageless, the cats are free to socialize, interact and play together. All of the friendly, social cats play together and integrate quickly. The shy or timid ones will gravitate to the good hiding spots, or will hang out with the other shy cats. The cranky personalities will find their own space where they feel most comfortable. Quite often, they will go for higher spots. This crankiness is often due to their own insecurities, or from fear of people or other animals.

It is possible for these cranky colored cats to get over their fears while they are boarded in a group environment such as the one I offer. From a young age, it is a good idea to integrate them regularly, both with other cats, dogs, people, or other social animals. With respect to the cranky cats, I find that there seems to be a two-year period in which to accomplish this socialization successfully. Alternately, the very shy or cranky cats, even adults, can at least abandon part of their fears of people or other cats if they are placed in this nonthreatening group environment. This allows them to build up their personal confidence. Magically, a stay of a minimum of two weeks seems to accomplish this.

As with people, if we are placed in a safe group environment every day for two weeks to face our most daunting fears, it stands to reason that with each day that passes unscathed, we start to wonder what all the fear was about in the first place. We, like them, can build confidence this way, championing our fears.

So, just as I can take great enjoyment from watching children laugh and play together, I take equal enjoyment from seeing young cranky calicos and female white and grey tabbies integrating, playing and befriending other cats.

People quite often will tell me that cats aren't social creatures; they are not pack animals like dogs are. I completely disagree. It only takes five minutes at my kennel to realize that simply isn't true. Just because cats defend their house and yard from outside cats doesn't mean they can't be social too. All animals need a social belonging, as humans do. It delights me to hear feedback from people whose cats, after being socialized in a safe group environment, have actually started allowing a few favorite friends into the backyard

As a child can live a much fuller, happier life when they have a couple of friends, cats can also have a better quality of life if they shed their fears and develop feline relationships, even if they are not full blown friendships. Cats live regularly to seventeen, eighteen or nineteen years of age. What a wonderful way to help them enjoy their long life! Surely, it must be more pleasant for them to meet each new animal with the intention of making a new friend, rather than them automatically thinking of it as a bullying experience.

There are so many things we can do to help our cats with all of their relationships, human and other. I strongly feel and have witnessed that socializing, especially from young ages, is a very kind and loving thing to do for our beloved pets.

Melanie Walker is an animal communicator and the owner of Pet Bed and Breakfast Inc. located at 5460 Canotek Rd, Unit 101, Ottawa, (Mtl Rd & Qwy). Her kennel is the very first fully cageless boarding facility for cats. (Sorry, no dogs). She started the kennel in 2001 with one clear goal in mind, "To provide cats with the feeling of freedom and personal safety while they are boarded". View the website at <http://www.petbedandbreakfast.ca> for more animal behavior information, or call us at 613-748-3585.