

Tea Time

IMPROVING FELINE SOCIALIZATION

My grandmother used to say, "You must invite someone to tea before you ask them to dinner!" I never understood this until I started working with cats. Felines are formal creatures. Many of us impose on them in a very intimate manner before being properly introduced. We scoop them up, hug them and then feel hurt if they struggle to get down. We try again, and Tabby rakes his claws across us, leaps away and dashes under the sofa.

Fleeing for the safety of the nearest piece of furniture when company comes may be an indicator that your cat is undersocialized. This behavior is expected of ferals and strays, but pet cats can act similarly. At five weeks, kittens begin socializing – getting to know and live with both humans and other cats – with open paws and minds; they keep this "door of opportunity" open until they're about three months old. If Tabby is older than a year and newly re-homed, the door may be closed, or even locked. With a feral cat, the door may be bolted; but there is still a door!

All socialization should be based on one principle: Reinforce social behavior; ignore asocial behavior. You can't force or punish a cat into being social. Forget your emotions and the cat's history; instead, focus on the animal's behavior.

A Cattery Will Get You Everywhere

The easiest method of socializing from the cat's point of view (but emotionally hardest for humans) employs a cattery cage. Cats, like humans, learn by watching. If Tabby can view her world without the world intruding on her space, she will socialize much faster.

- Place the cattery in a room with moderate day traffic. If the animal is very stressed, use a quiet bedroom.
- Place a covered cat bed, or a cardboard box with a hole cut for a door, in the cattery along with a small litter pan. If there is no room for a bed, drape half the cage so the cat can hide.
- Place Tabby's water opposite the litter pan. Feed her at regular intervals, at least three times a day. Leave the food in the cage for fifteen minutes, and then remove any left overs. Don't talk to or pet the cat during these exchanges.
- Go about your day as usual, but ignore the cat – you want her to watch you, not the other way around. Talk to yourself if you live alone; this acclimates Tabby to a relaxed voice.

Begin "cat-enticing behaviors" in front of the cattery. Read the newspaper on the floor, underlining as you

go. Sort and fold socks; play solitaire; do crosswords. Be creative, but keep the activities low-key.

From Hand to Paw

Once Tabby is comfortable eating, begin to "accidentally" leave your hand a few feet from the dish. Gradually move it closer with each feeding, until the cat eats with your hand near by. Next, place your hand in the cattery before you put in food. The cat may very well begin welcoming you by rubbing your hand!

Next, put a small amount of tasty food such as tuna oil or anchovy paste on your hand; place it near the cat in a relaxed manner. If she starts to lick you, you have successfully initiated mutual grooming! Hum your praise quietly; refrain from loud outbursts such as "GOOD KITTY!"

When your cat consistently comes to your hand for a treat, put your hand in without the treat. If she comes, reward her with a bit of deli turkey or freeze-dried liver from your other hand. Once Tabby is comfortable taking treats from you in the cattery, it's time to open the cage door. Make sure the door to the room is closed. The idea is to give her one room at a time.

Now try those "cat-enticing behaviors" with the cattery door open with treats scattered close to your body. If the cat initiates contact, reciprocate! You're on your way to having a social kitty.

The key to any socialization program is patience. You can do this without a cage, but it will take longer. The most important factor is to reward and reinforce any social behaviors in a way cats understand – with food. After all, what would tea be without crumpets?



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