

Adapting Your Cat To New People and Situations

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Doug's cat, Spike, runs and hides whenever guests come to the house. Even though he is very affectionate with Doug, Spike rarely comes out around strangers. Sue's cat, Miss Puddin, is terrified of going in her cat carrier and cries whenever she has to ride in the car. Why is it that most cats seem to be so shy and afraid of new people and new situations while most dogs seem to welcome new opportunities? It is possible that some of the differences may have to do with genetics. Cats and dogs are different species and have evolved to live different life-styles. It is more likely that the differences are due to differences in how we raise our cats and dogs and the kinds of experiences we give them.

For example, most people take their dogs for walks starting at a very young age. This allows them to become exposed to lots of new people and new things. How many people take their cats for walks or even carry them to visit the neighbors? Not many. Many dogs get to ride in the car from a very young age and the rides are often associated with positive consequences, such as going to a park. How many people take their cats for rides in their cars? The only time most cats ride in the car is to go to the veterinarian. This is not always a pleasant experience for the cat.

Scientific studies have shown that in both cats and dogs, exposing animals to new people and new experiences from a very young age can have life-long effects. Puppies and kittens exposed in pleasant and non-frightening ways to new people, often become very friendly to unfamiliar people as adults. Puppies and kittens exposed to new things, new places and new situations seem to adapt to changes much more quickly as adults. The take-home lesson from this research is that if you want your cat to be less fearful of new situations and people she should be exposed to new things from an early age. While it is easier to help young animals adapt to new people and situations, it is not impossible to adapt older cats to new surroundings. The key is to not let the cat become frightened. If the cat is forced to experience new things that frighten her, her fear will not lessen but become more intense. Gradual exposures to new people, to the cat carrier or to car rides that are associated with food, play or other pleasant things can lessen a cat's fears and make her more enjoyable to be around in these situations.