

////// The Behavior Department

New Research Helps Adopters Meet Their Feline Soul Mates

The ASPCA's Feline-ality program matches cats to people through examination of their personalities and behaviors

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Many of you likely know about the ASPCA's Meet Your Match Canine-ality and Puppy-ality adoption program, which helps match adopters to dogs and puppies based on the lifestyle and expectations of the adopter and the behavior of the individual animal. Composed of an assessment that gauges certain canine behaviors and an adopter survey that invites potential guardians to respond to questions about everything from expectations to home environments, the Meet Your Match program pairs humans with pooches most likely to fit in with their lives.

Soon after launching that program, we at the ASPCA began to focus on creating a similar program for cats. Thanks to the generous support of the Iams Company, we have spent the last two years in research and development of "Feline-ality."

When we first started the cat project in 2003, little research had been done on feline behavior assessment tools and their validity. Several of my colleagues—Katherine Houpt, Ilana Reisner, Kathy Carlstead and others—have been doing fantastic work researching behavior modification techniques in domestic cats, but there has been considerably less focus on predicting future behaviors.

But important new information appeared a few months before the Feline-ality research project began, when behaviorist Janice M. Siegford of Michigan State University and several other researchers published an exciting study in *Anthrozoös* that validated components of a tool developed in the 1980s to assess the suitability of cats for placement in nursing homes. The assessment items researched focused on cats' responses to a set of interactions

with an unfamiliar person. Siegford's work became an important component of Feline-ality.

We surveyed many shelters across the country about the behavior assessment methods they were using for their cats. None of the facilities had conducted formal research, but several were using methods they felt were helpful in determining adoptability or future behavior. Many of the behaviors and traits examined, including behavior in the cage and ease of handling, were evaluated consistently in the assessments performed from shelter to shelter. We chose to investigate several of these behaviors.

Phase I: Cats with guardians

The first piece of research focused on finding out if we could predict how a cat would behave in the home based on his responses to a set of assessment items. Our focus was whether or not there were correlations between the behaviors cats exhibited in the test situation and those reported by their owners.

We identified seven cat boarding facilities in Wichita, Kansas, willing to participate in the study. Guardians were asked to participate when they made the appointment to board their animals or dropped their cats off. A total of 50 cats were included in this phase of the study.

This phase gave us the opportunity to investigate aggression. Since these cats were in homes, we could verify whether or not the aggression we observed during testing at the boarding facilities was also found in the home. Seven cats displayed aggression at the facility; six of those had no reports of aggression in the home environment. Yet all six cats, their guardians



reported, always ran away when guests visited or new situations arose—a finding we plan to investigate further.

Another interesting piece of information we acquired centered on litter box use. We found no correlation between litter box use/non-use in the boarding environment and litter box use/non-use in the home. We did, however, find a correlation between cats who did not scatter their litter at all and cats who had litter box problems in the home. We also found correlations between behavior in the testing environment and reported behaviors in the home related to affection, social interaction, reaction to novel stimuli, and interaction with toys and people.

We decreased the number of assessment steps and made some other modifications based on the results of this initial study, and we readied ourselves for Phase II.

Phase II: Shelter cats

Once we'd pared down the assessment process, we wanted to evaluate how well the tool would work in a shelter environment. The Animal Refuge League in

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Technicolor Kitties

Is your ideal cat purple, orange, or green?

No, we're not tinkering with genes or dyes. These are the color codes for the ASPCA's Meet Your Match Feline-ality profiles. A cat's Feline-ality is determined by his scores on two assessments, one that focuses on "valiance" (the cat's response to new stimuli) and the other on his level of independence. The color category each cat falls into, whether purple, orange, or green, is determined by how the cat scores on the valiance scale. Within each color code are three possible levels of independence (independent, social, and gregarious), for a total of nine possible Feline-ality designations.

The adopter survey component of Meet Your Match identifies adopter preferences corresponding to characteristics measured in the feline assessment. This one-page survey takes only a few minutes to complete. Its tone is lighthearted and upbeat—more magazine quiz than college application. Adopters enjoy completing the survey and finding out what color they are. For example, green adopters are most successful with cats who adapt quickly to new situations. Orange adopters are a good fit with middle-of-the-road cats, and purple adopters are comfortable with cats who need time and encouragement to adjust to new surroundings.

The cat personalities all have appealing nicknames: The gregarious green cat is tagged the "Leader of the Band"—a demonstrative cat who's brimming with confidence. The social orange cat would be known as the "Sidekick": a steady companion who likes both attention and alone time. The independent purple cat bears the moniker "Private Investigator": an undercover cat who can seemingly vanish into thin air.



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Westbrook, Maine, and the Wisconsin Humane Society in Milwaukee agreed to serve as research sites.

We were able to collect complete data for 84 cats. The cats' behaviors both in the cage and during assessments were compared to new adopter reports. Behaviors in the cage did not correlate with the adopters' reports as strongly as many of the out-of-cage assessment items. But in taking a closer look at the "in-cage" information, we found that behavior information collected within the first 36 hours of the cat's arrival in the shelter did in fact correlate with behavior in the home.

Just as Siegford and her colleagues had seen in their research, we found that

many behaviors seemed stable when the cat was moved from one environment (the shelter) to a new environment (the home). For example, cats who vocalized during certain assessment items were likely to be "talkative" cats in the home. Cats who played with toys in the test were likely to play with toys in the home. Cats who withdrew from novel stimuli during the assessment process were likely to withdraw from novel stimuli in the home. Further, we found certain aspects of social interaction with the tester were also observed in the home by the new adopter.

At this point, Feline-ality was coming together. We needed to be able to color-

code our cats according to their behavior so that they fit the Meet Your Match process (see sidebar at left for more details on cats' colors). Through phase one and two, we had found two major scales relating to "Feline-ality": an independent-gregarious scale that measured social behavior and a "valiance" scale that measured response to novel stimuli (how the cat was likely to react in new situations). We also identified important behaviors that were stable but that did not fit into those two scales; for example, knowing whether or not a cat was vocal or playful could enhance an adopter's bond with the new pet.

Phase III: Matching cats with adopters

Now that we had a tool to assess certain feline behaviors, we needed to test several other components:

- Could we interact with adopters in a fun and meaningful way to help guide and educate them to make a good match?
- Is the process doable for shelters? Can they make the time? Understand the components? Find the space?
- Are the expectations that adopters develop during the adoption process fulfilled once the cat is in the home?
- Do adopters like the process?
- Would adopters come back to a Meet Your Match shelter?

We developed an adopter survey to identify expectations and lifestyle in order to make the best match. When completed, we invited five shelters to help beta test the program. Three shelters (the Animal Refuge League; the Kansas Humane Society in Wichita; and the Humane Society of Boulder Valley in Colorado) tested it first. We measured their experiences and those of their adopters, and then we brought in two additional shelters (the Animal Welfare Association in Voorhees, New Jersey, and the Hamilton-Burlington SPCA in Ontario) after we made modifications to the process.

Results of the adopter survey were as follows:

- 105 out of 107 adopters surveyed reported that they would probably choose a shelter that uses the Meet Your Match Adoption program when adopting an animal in the future.

- When asked, “How did your adoption experience impact your opinion of the shelter? Please rate on a scale of 1 to 10 with 10 being ‘very positive,’ 5 being ‘no impact on your opinion,’ and 1 being ‘very negative,’ ” the mean response was 9.13.
- When asked to rate how satisfied they were with the program, the average response was 8.89 out of 10.
- When asked to rate how well the cat they’d adopted exhibited the type of personality they expected after participating in the Meet Your Match program, the average response was 9.03.

These results are exciting. Even though many people adopted outside the color category they’d been matched to (60 adopters adopted within their color and 47 outside their color), the Meet Your Match tools helped them develop the right expectations and make good matches regardless.

We also received several specific responses that indicated how happy adopters were with the system. An adopter at the Animal Rescue League said, “Excellent program... When I went [to ARL] there were several cats available, and the program helped me decide who was right for me. I could see how the cat would behave after I got her home. She acts exactly as they said she would.”

And an adopter who had adopted a cat outside the color code told us, “He is not a perfect fit for our family. We should have chosen a cat in our orange category, but the kids fell in love with a purple cat ... He is shy and kind of standoffish ... but we love him ... and will make it work.”

Stability of behavior

The correlation of the independent-gregarious scores (ranking social behavior) observed in the shelter and in the home was statistically significant. Adopters reported how often their cats were spending time in the same room with them; the cats’ responses to petting; and the cats’ affiliation with children. They also rated their levels of agreement with the statement, “My cat is constantly finding new ways to get my attention.”

The score for social behavior became much more predictive when cats who scored four or lower were removed from analysis. In our sample of 107 cats, six were removed from analysis. We hypothesize that cats who score this low are not behaving as they normally would—that that they are “shut down” and need a bit more time to settle before they are ready for the Feline-ality tests.

The overall valiance score (for how the cat is likely to react in new situations) was statistically significant, with adopters reporting on how quickly the cat adjusted to the new home; how the cat reacted to guests in the home; and the cat’s comfort with handling for routine health issues.

As with the earlier research, we found that certain behaviors were quite stable, such as vocal behavior, toy use, and comfort with being held.

Shelter statistics

Once the testing was completed, we asked the beta-test shelters to compare their numbers regarding euthanasia, length of stay, adoptions, and returns for the period they had instituted the Feline-ality program with the same time period the previous year. The following is just a taste of the results:

- The Animal Refuge League reduced cat euthanasia by more than 45 percent and reduced the average length of stay by 20 days.
- The Kansas Humane Society saw a reduction in cat return rates—more than 11 percent—and experienced a 46 percent increase in adoptions.
- The Hamilton-Burlington SPCA saw a 3 percent decrease in both euthanasia and returns.
- The Humane Society of Boulder Valley saw an average reduction of 7 days in length of stay prior to adoption.
- The percentage of cats adopted compared to intake was up 20 percent for the Animal Welfare Association, while the length of stay was reduced by an average of 23 days.

We are so excited about the program. I think one of our beta testers summed it up best when she said, “When we began

work on Feline-ality, we were hopeful that we would be able to develop a tool to better match cats to the right adopter. The final Feline-ality program has exceeded our expectations. Adopters, shelter staff, and cats are all richly benefiting from the program.”

We owe a special thanks to Iams for their continued support of the Meet Your Match program. **AS**

“Meet Your Match,” “Canine-ality,” and “Feline-ality” are registered trademarks of the ASPCA. To learn more about implementing the ASPCA’s Meet Your Match Feline-ality adoption program at your shelter, visit www.aspc.org/meetyourmatch, or email outreach@aspc.org.



Emily Weiss, Ph.D., is the senior director of shelter behavior programs at the ASPCA. As the curator of behavior and research at the Sedgwick County Zoo, Weiss developed enrichment and training programs for many different species—from lions and Komodo dragons to African hunting dogs and giant cassowary birds. During this time, she continued to create assessment tools for shelter animals, first developing the SAFER test, a behavior assessment used by shelters throughout the country. Later she developed Meet Your Match Canine-ality and Puppy-ality, now an ASPCA program sponsored by Iams. Weiss’ focus also includes enrichment and behavior modification programs; she works with companion horses as well. She lives in Benton, Kansas (population 700), with her husband, four dogs, four horses, two llamas, and two exotic cattle.