

SOCIALIZING ANIMALS, WHAT IS INVOLVED?

Routinely when we speak to people about the work we do, we talk about “socializing” as being one of our main goals for the animals that come to the sanctuary. But what does “socializing” or “socialization” of an animal really mean?

By definition: “Socializing is the process of working with and training an animal to live in a close relationship and in harmony with humans and other animals”.

At the sanctuary it means that the animal is comfortable with and not afraid of humans as they work around and with them. It also means that they are comfortable being around other animals of their own species and with potentially other species as well.

So how do we go about socializing an animal? The first thing is to actually train the “human” about the animal(s) they will be working with. What are the things they need to know about that animal? Its potential behavior as a species and as an individual, as well as what do we know of the animal’s history? Additionally what are the indicators or signs that the animal will give us potentially that will indicate that they are unhappy, stressed or uncomfortable? (i.e. ears laid back, hair standing up on their backs, legs stiff/not relaxed, heavy perspiration and irregular breathing)

Additionally what are the human movements or behaviors that will potentially startle the animal or trigger inappropriate reactions? (i.e. loud noises, coming from a direction where the animal can’t see you approaching, touching sensitive areas, or possibly simply carrying a rake or shovel/poop collector or bucket of water).

Given that we are aware of and heed all of the previous items we find that by safely introducing humans of all shapes and sizes to an animal over a period of time works best in regards to most socialization endeavors.



There are exceptions however. Given that we often do not know the animal's history prior to its arrival at the sanctuary; a pair of gloves, a specific colored hat or the general appearance of an individual may trigger a negative response that stems back to something that occurred earlier in the animal's life.

If that occurs we attempt to figure out and note the trigger and resulting behavior change. Subsequently we either avoid similar situations going forward as much as possible or endeavor to change the animal's response to that negative trigger. In those cases a behaviorist is typically engaged in changing the animal's reactive response.

Assuming we have an absence of negative triggers we endeavor to first make the animal comfortable with us working around them (i.e. cleaning their stalls or area, and feeding/watering). Then as time goes by we endeavor to touch them through brushing, petting or simply laying our hands on them for short periods of time. Note: The time this takes to transpire varies greatly from animal to animal and in some cases the animal is so "damaged" that they never totally trust humans but that is the rare exception. In most cases the animal eventually will begin to trust and will let a second human prove that they are trustworthy and the human will receive unconditional love in return.



As we continue to work on socialization we often move towards putting leashes, harnesses or other equipment on various animals if deemed appropriate or necessary. Once they are comfortable with the varying devices we may work with a farrier, a veterinarian and other professionals to make sure the health care processes and training are as stress free as possible.



As we go through these indoctrinations and socialization processes we endeavor to introduce the various species to other species as well to help to provide them with as much exposure as possible.

It is a delicate balance at times though as we don't want "prey" animals to lose their instinctive awareness of potential "predators". As an example, donkeys and goats are often inherently fearful and possibly aggressive towards dogs. They equate dogs to other canines such as wolves and coyotes and the donkeys specifically will strike out aggressively at a dog especially if the mother donkey has a baby. Given this reality we try to introduce them slowly to smaller dogs while they don't have young ones and slowly try to reduce the "flee" or "aggressive" instincts while maintaining a healthy awareness.



In the end we want every animal that goes to their forever home from our sanctuary to be happy and well-adjusted to life with humans and hopefully with other animals. That is the goal for everyone whether they are dogs, cats, chickens, ducks, donkeys, horses, goats or any other species we may help along the way.

In turn, we want the human adopters to be fully aware of how each animal needs to be humanely treated and cared for. Our ultimate goal is that every species including humans will be socialized to the point where we can all live easily and peacefully together.

AMEN!!!!