

When Children Turn Into Cats

By Adair Lara

I just realized that while children are dogs, loyal and affectionate, teenagers are cats.

It's so easy to be the owner of a dog. You feed it, train it and boss it around, and it puts its head on your knee and gazes at you as if you were a Rembrandt painting. It follows you around, chews the dust covers off the Great Literature series if you stay too long at the party and bounds inside with enthusiasm when you call it in from the yard.

Then, one day around the age of 13, your adoring little puppy turns into a big old cat. When you call it to come inside, it looks amazed, as if wondering who died and made you emperor.

Instead of dogging your footsteps, it disappears. You won't see it again until it gets hungry, when it pauses on its sprint through the kitchen long enough to turn its nose up at whatever you're serving. When you reach out to ruffle its head, in that old affectionate gesture, it twists away from you, and then gives you a blank stare, as if trying to remember where it has seen you before.

It sometimes conks out right after breakfast. It might steel itself to the communication necessary to get the back door opened or the car keys handed to it, but even that amount of dependence is disagreeable to it now.

Stunned, more than a little hurt, you have two choices. The first - and the one chosen by many parents - is that you can continue to behave like a dog owner. After all, your heart still swells when you look at your dog, you still want its company, and naturally when you tell it to stop digging up the rose bushes, you still expect it to obey you, pronto. It pays no attention, now, of course, being a cat. So you toss it onto the back porch, telling it to stay there and think about things, mister, and it glares at you, not deigning to reply. It wants you to recognize that it has a new nature now, and it must feel independent or it will die.

You, not realizing that the dog is now a cat, think something must be desperately wrong with it. It seems so antisocial, so distant, so sort of depressed. It won't go on family outings.

Since you're the one who raised it, taught it to fetch and stay and sit on command, naturally you assume that whatever is wrong, it is something you did, or left undone. Flooded with guilt and fear, you redouble your efforts to make your pet behave.

Only now, you're dealing with a cat, so everything that worked before now produces exactly the opposite of the desired result. Call it, and it runs away. Tell it to sit, and it jumps on the counter. The more you go toward it, wringing your hands, the more it moves away.

Your second choice is to do the necessary reading and learn to behave like a cat owner. Put a dish of food near the door and let it come to you. If you must issue commands, find out what it wants to do and command it to do it. But remember that a cat needs affection, too, and your help. Sit still and it will come, seeking that warm, comforting lap it has not entirely forgotten. Be there to open the door for it.

Realize that all dog owners go through this, and few find it easy. I miss the little boy who insisted I watch "Full House" with him, and who has now sealed himself into a bedroom with a stereo and TV. The little girl who wrote me mush notes and is now peeling rubber in the driveway.

The only consolation is that if you do it right, let them go, be cool as a cat yourself, one day they will walk into the kitchen and give you a big kiss and say, "You've been on your feet all day; let me get those dishes for you." And you'll realize they're dogs again.