

Introductions, Please: Helping Foster Dogs Adjust to Temporary Homes

BY MELISSA BAHLEDA, M.A.T., C.B.C.

Fostering dogs can be a rewarding experience or a disastrous one. It all depends on how well you prepare. Carefully introducing your own animals to your new temporary residents is key to retaining a harmonious household, and housetraining your foster dogs will keep that household smelling sweet and improve the dogs' chances for successful adoption. What follows is some advice on both. For more information on crate training and other behavior issues, visit www.petsforlife.org.

Avoiding Fostering Fisticuffs

While disagreements and quests for power are unavoidable when bringing a foster animal into a household already claimed by other pets, you can avoid injuries and stress by stopping fights before they ever begin.

If you plan to foster, your own pets must be non-aggressive and subjected to as little stress as possible. If they display any aggression toward people or animals, contact a good trainer or behavior counselor for advice on behavior modification before even thinking about becoming a foster parent. Consider that the safest scenario may be not to foster at all. If, on the other hand, your pets are calm, friendly, well-socialized, healthy, and behaviorally sound, they can help you with the fostering experience by providing a model of positive behavior.

Whether you're able to bring your pets to the shelter to meet their future roommate (the preferable location whenever possible) or whether they'll be introduced outdoors on neutral ground, here are a few ideas for ensuring harmony in your animal kingdom:

Exercise restraint. When introducing foster dogs to your own animals, all the

dogs should be leashed and able to meet on neutral territory if possible. Resident cats being introduced to a new dog for the first time should have access to escape routes or high perches that dogs can't reach. It is important to remain calm and confident in your handling skills; if the dogs or cats sense that you are nervous or scared, they are also more likely to be nervous and scared and therefore more defensive. If your dogs are leashed, don't tug or pull at them constantly; a dog must be given the freedom to socialize with the other dog, and dogs should be pulled away only if they give an indication that a fight is about to occur (frozen body posture, raised hackles, snarling, growling, or snapping).

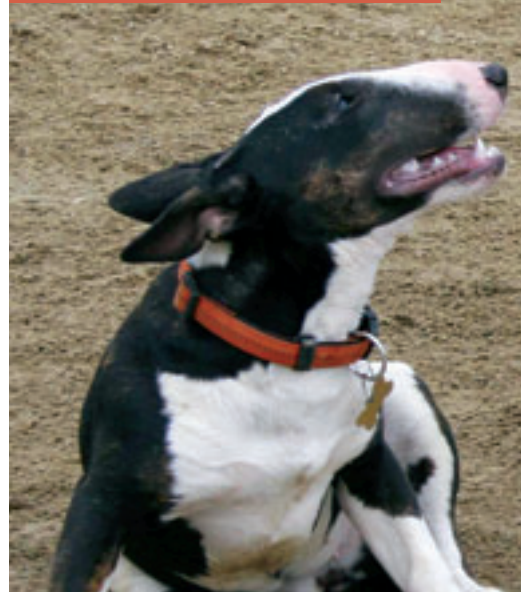
Observe the signals. Because "reading" a dog or cat's behavior is key to preventing fights, it's essential to familiarize yourself with canine or feline behavior and body language *before* engaging in this process. If a serious fight is going to occur, chances are you will know it in the first few minutes of the animals' interaction. If either animal becomes frightened, stressed, or aggressive, remove both animals from the situation immediately.

Bestow praise, but stay guarded. Once you've determined that the new dog and resident pets are getting along, praise them for this positive behavior and allow them to continue to interact. Don't forget, however, that a foster pet is basically an unknown entity, and no matter how well the animals seem to be getting along, you should never leave any foster animal alone and unattended with other pets and children.

Break up fights safely. If a fight does occur, do not put yourself between the fighting animals! This is a recipe for disaster—and one of the easiest ways to get bitten. Instead, distract the animals by dousing them with water or making a loud, startling noise, such as banging on a large pot. Once the animals are separated and you can safely handle them, leash or crate them to prevent another fight, and call your shelter, trainer, or veterinarian for assistance.

Set aside time for your own pets. Once your resident animals and temporary houseguest have begun settling in comfortably together, allow your pets to socialize with foster animals, but also try to plan activities that involve only you and your immediate furry family. This helps prevent your pets from harboring resentment toward your foster dog.

This article, written as a companion piece to the features that start on page 20, is intended for distribution to new volunteers and other members of the public who are interested in fostering dogs. Author Melissa Bahleda is a certified canine trainer and behavior counselor.





INDIA LAWSON



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Proper Potty Training

Housetraining your foster dog or puppy will be a priority. Even dogs who've had previous training may need to start from scratch, as life in the shelter sometimes causes them to abandon their house-trained ways. Two rules are key:

Rule #1: Do not paper train unless you are willing to spend a great deal of time and effort deprogramming and then reprogramming the dog at a later stage. Dogs develop a “substrate preference,” an inclination for using a particular kind of surface on which to relieve themselves. So if you must paper train, scatter leaves, grass, and dirt on the paper to ease the dog's transition to outdoor elimination.

Rule #2: Never hit the dog or rub his nose in his mess. This will only traumatize the dog and make him think that he just shouldn't “go” in front of you. After all, at first, he may have no idea that he is not supposed to relieve himself in your house.

Now you know what *not* to do. But what *should* you do to train your new friend in a positive manner?

Watch for the squat. The best housetraining involves crate training, patience, and most of all, vigilance. Dogs and puppies will usually spend some time sniffing around, and then they'll either lift a leg or squat to urinate and defecate. Remember, for the first one to two weeks, your foster dog must be supervised constantly, so watch him closely when he is out of his crate. If he starts sniffing around and seems to look for “his spot,” squats, or goes to the door and cries, take him outside immediately. If he goes, praise him profusely, for he has done a great thing. Encourage him to relieve himself outdoors by giving an elimination command (“Go potty!” or “Go pee!”), and use this command every time you walk him outside, praising him every time he goes.

Make brief use of the crate. If, after several minutes, he has still not gone, take him back inside, place him back in a dog crate for another 20 to 30 minutes, and

then take him outside again and repeat the process. The dog should not be allowed to roam freely in your house until he has relieved himself outside, and within days, he should catch on to the fact that he is free to play in the house and socialize with you only when he has “gone potty” outside. For an older puppy or mature dog, placing a bell on your doorknob and encouraging him to ring the bell before you take him outside will also give him a way to let you know when he needs to go out.

Catch him in the act. If it is too late and the dog has already done his business in the middle of your living room floor, do not overreact. (Remember Rule #2.) Point to the mess, tell him “No” or “Uh-Uh” without yelling, take him outside, and encourage outdoor elimination.

If you can catch the dog in the act, startle him (clap your hands and say “Hey!” or “What are you doing?”) and take him outside. If you can get him to finish outside, you have just had a golden opportunity to teach him exactly what you want and exactly what you don't want. Lots of praise is in order!

Control odors. Some dogs, including unneutered and recently neutered males—and dogs who have been chained in the past or have been kept exclusively outdoors—may be resistant to your housetraining attempts, especially if other dogs have eliminated inside your house in the past. Use an enzymatic cleaner to thoroughly clean any previously soiled areas before bringing your foster dog home, or keep the dog out of areas where old odors may encourage him.

Monitor health. If the dog is still soiling your house after two weeks of vigilant housetraining, or if he begins to eliminate in the crate, call the shelter or your veterinarian for assistance, as the dog may have a health problem that's preventing successful housetraining. 🐾

Becoming a foster



parent:

Are you ready?



✦ Written for volunteers and potential volunteers, this article and the one on page 26 can be copied and distributed to community members interested in helping their local shelters or rescue groups. The author, Melissa Bahleda, is a certified canine trainer and behavior counselor who specializes in rescuing and rehabilitating homeless dogs. The owner and operator of PARTNERS! Canine Training, Behavior Counseling, and Shelter Services, Bahleda lives in Shenandoah, Virginia, with her husband, Tom; her horse, Tanka; four goats, two cats, one bird, rescued “canine partners” Madison, LuLu, and Mona; and an assortment of foster dogs.

BY MELISSA BAHLEDA, M.A.T., C.B.C.

Because I have been fostering shelter dogs for more than 20 years, I am often asked the same questions: “Why do you foster?” “How do you find the time?” “How do you choose the right animal?” “How do you know if they’ll get along with your pets?” “How do you keep from getting attached?”

Fostering a dog, cat, rabbit, horse, or any other animal in need of shelter, love, and guidance is a time-consuming effort, but it’s also one of the most rewarding ways to help homeless pets. Providing a “stepping stone” for animals in search of permanent homes saves lives, alleviates the strain on animal shelters, helps set the stage for successful adoptions, and teaches you the skills that will enable you to help other animals in need.

I have found that dogs and cats who are fostered in positive, nurturing environments by people with basic training and behavior knowledge are more likely to be adopted; less likely to be returned to the shelter; less likely to suffer from behavior and training problems; and less stressed and more able to adapt to life in their new homes.

With that sort of introduction, you may have already picked up the phone to call your local shelter or rescue group to ask about fostering. But as with adoption, the decision to foster shelter pets is not one to be made lightly. If you’re considering taking a foster pet into your home, first investigate your local shelter’s fostering policies and application requirements; then ask yourself these important questions.

Does fostering fit your household and your life?

The health and welfare of all individuals in your home—human and animal—must be considered before bringing another creature into the mix. Fostering a homeless pet should never be considered unless your home environment is happy, safe, healthy, and spacious enough to nurture the foster pet adequately and retain sanity among the existing members of your home. If any of your family members are contending with allergies, excessive stress, other physical or mental health issues, career instability, financial difficulties, or housing or space restric-

tions, fostering is not a good option for you at this time.

But if you believe you have the ability to foster, and the entire household agrees that fostering would be a positive experience, your next question should be “Do I have the time?”

Fostering a shelter pet is a 24/7 job. Although you may not be physically interacting with the animal every second of the day, you will be responsible round the clock for the pet’s safety, comfort, and general well-being, and this responsibility alone can be exhausting.

If your work or family schedule is already so hectic that adding another time-consuming respon-

sibility will only create more stress, do not consider fostering at this time. If that new foster dog will spend long periods of time in his crate—periods that frequently approach or exceed the eight-hour threshold—or if you’ve killed your umpteenth houseplant because you just haven’t had time to water it, you’ll want to put those foster dreams on hold for now.

The amount of personal attention needed will vary greatly from animal to animal, but you can expect to spend anywhere from three to seven hours a day interacting with a foster pet, and even more if you’re planning to foster puppies or kittens. Teaching dogs or cats the les-



WHAT IF IT DOESN'T WORK OUT?

If you have decided that fostering is right for you and feel prepared for the experience, you may still encounter obstacles to a positive outcome for your foster pet. These may include unknown behavior problems that are difficult to modify; illness; injury or unexpected death; the foster pet’s non-acceptance of pets already in the household (even after a reasonable acclimation period); or existing pets’ non-acceptance of the foster pet.

Because dogs and cats passed from home to home or repeatedly returned to the shelter tend to suffer from bonding and behavioral problems, you must be willing to allow a significant amount of time and training in areas of housetraining, crate training, leash training, and basic obedience.

But if your foster pet has been given ample time to adjust to your

home (usually two to six weeks) and still seems anxious, becomes aggressive, or suffers from any significant behavior or health issues, talk to the staff at your shelter or consult a veterinarian, trainer, or recommended behavior counselor. Serious health or behavior problems may require the attention of a veterinarian or professional trainer. Never be embarrassed to ask for help.

Accidents can happen as well. No matter how conscientious you are, dogs and cats can escape, become injured, or even die. Talk to the staff at your shelter about the possibilities before you bring an animal home, and make sure the shelter you are working with allows you to sign documents outlining and clarifying expectations, requirements, and liability issues before the animal is put into your care.

OSCAR C. WILLIAMS



sons they will need to become happy, thriving, lifelong members of another family is the essence of fostering, and this takes time and patience.

What kind of foster animal would be best for your family?

If you and your family feel you have the time and ability to provide a dog or cat with the socialization, exercise, positive stimulation, sup-

plies, regular feedings, health care, vet care, and training she needs to become a happy, healthy addition to someone's home, you next need to ask yourself, "Who do I want to foster and why?"

Any animal considered for fostering should be healthy, fully vaccinated, behaviorally sound, and disease-free (unless you are specifically fostering heartworm-positive dogs, feline leukemia-positive

cats, or other "special needs" animals). But those are not the only considerations.

These were some of mine: Although I love cats, my husband is severely allergic, so I needed to accept the fact that I could not foster cats. Because I am a certified canine trainer and behavior counselor, I decided that it would make sense to primarily foster dogs.

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my own dogs, I also care for an assortment of other four-legged and winged creatures, and I continuously have people of all shapes, sizes, and ages coming in and out of my home. Because of this, I knew I could only foster dogs who are known to be non-aggressive with other animals or children, and who do not possess a high prey drive. (In general, this is the type of dog I recommend others foster as well. Minor behavior problems such as separation anxiety and house-training issues can usually be addressed with a little time, effort, and knowledge, but aggression issues should be left to the experts.)

Also, because most of the shelters and rescue organizations I work with can easily find homes for purebred and small dogs—and even have waiting lists of people eager to adopt them—I have chosen to foster medium to large mixed-breed dogs instead. (You might want to talk to your shelter about which sorts of dogs are most likely to get passed over.) I specifically look for those with wonderful temperaments who have excelled on their behavior evaluations (see “The Skinny on Behavior Assessments” at right) but might otherwise be passed by due to looks, breed, or color. Hence, many of my foster dogs tend to be Lab or shepherd

THE SKINNY ON BEHAVIOR ASSESSMENTS

Regardless of the type of shelter or rescue you choose to foster for, you should aim to work with one that performs a simple, humane behavior assessment. Every animal who comes through the organization’s doors should at least be evaluated for temperament and aggression—after a suitable period of time has been granted for adjustment to shelter life (at least three days, preferably longer).

Cats and kittens should be observed and given a significant amount of interaction (petting, play, and socialization) to determine their personalities and the types of homes they are best suited for (a single-cat abode, a home with no children, etc.). Dogs and puppies should be observed and evaluated for dominance, aggression, resource guarding, and obedience. The shelter should also use a standard form for recording and reporting evaluation results, and should be willing to share this information with you and other members of the public wishing to foster or adopt.

Bear in mind that a shelter environment can be stressful on a pet, and the behavior observed in the shelter may vary greatly from the behavior an animal displays in your home. Any questionable or seemingly abnormal behavior should be reported to the shelter immediately. Conversely, don’t hesitate to also report positive behavior. As a foster guardian, you have the added benefit of learning more about the animal’s behavior than possibly anyone else, and therefore, you are also the pet’s best advocate in helping him find the perfect home.



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mixes between one and three years old—the period when they are most likely to be surrendered.

Other foster families I have worked with prefer to take in specific breeds or certain kinds of animals—female cats, orange tabbies, or whatever seems to work best for them, their human families, and the pets they already have. It's important to do the research *before* you bring an animal into your home. For instance, if your family is not very active, a young, energetic border collie probably isn't the dog for you.

Remember, fostering does not work if it's stressful for anyone involved, including other pets. If bringing a young puppy or kitten into your home stresses out your animal family members or puts any of them in danger, you may need to reconsider what types of animals you foster—or even reconsider fostering altogether. Saving one animal's life while jeopardizing or reducing the quality of another's isn't justified.

Are you prepared to say goodbye?

Some of my foster dogs are with me for days; some are with me for months. And yes, there have been one or two who have just fit so well into our lives, our hearts, and our home that they have attained status as one of our permanent pets.

It's important to remember, however, that fostering should not be viewed as a “trial adoption.” Anyone who fosters must be realistic about the expected outcome: that the animal will be adopted by another family. While it is impossible not to become attached to a sweet dog or cat living in your home, it's necessary to keep your original goals in mind and remain committed to finding the animal a new family.

Although I exercise and socialize my foster dogs with my own dogs



JODI FREDIANI

every day, I also plan “Mom Time” activities solely for my own dogs. Not only does this soothe relations between the temporary and permanent members of my canine family; it also helps me keep “my pets” mentally separated from “my foster pets” so the level of attachment I experience with both sets of dogs remains different, and the line between the two does not become blurred.

I have met foster families who became too emotionally attached to part with their foster pets, even when great homes were available and waiting. Think of it this way: For each pet who is adopted by his foster family, one fewer “foster opportunity” exists, which translates into fewer animals being given a wonderful chance at life in a real home. If you find it hard to say goodbye, imagine how happy your foster pet will be in his or her new home—and remember how you helped make that happen.



Fostering fundamentals

BY MELISSA BAHLEDA, M.A.T., C.B.C.

So you've decided to take the plunge and bring a new animal into your home. Good for you! You are not only doing your part to fight animal homelessness; you are also relieving the burden on your local animal shelter. You may already have a pet or two at home, but since your foster pet won't be a permanent member of your family, you'll need to make special arrangements when planning and preparing for his care. Read on to find out how to provide a good foster home to an animal on his way to a lifelong home.



PETER CASELLA

obtain proper training first. Young animals require *lots* of work, which can include hourly feedings, stimulation for urination and defecation, intense house- or litter-box training, and specialized health care and disease prevention. For this reason, I have chosen to foster only animals older than four months; you might make a similar “rule” depending on your schedule and experience.

Regardless of the type of animal you plan to foster, you should seek to work with a shelter that performs simple yet effective and humane behavior assessments (see “The Skinny on Behavior Assessments” on p. 24). Also, if you already have children and pets, their safety and welfare must be the highest priority, so shelter animals who have proven to be good with children and other animals will be your best choice. Whenever possible, ask the shelter if you can bring your children and pets to meet an animal you are considering fostering; these “meet and greets” can be essential to determining whether or not the pet will adjust well to life in your home.

The more work you can do up front to determine that the pet's temperament and personality will match those of other members of your household, the smaller the chances are that you will experience the heartbreak of having to return a foster pet to the shelter due to “incompatibility.”

Make the right match

After you've decided you are ready to foster, selection of your temporary houseguest will be one of your most important considerations. Choosing the right animal will help ensure a positive experience for all; choosing the wrong animal will create chaos in your home and can cause him or your own pets serious harm.

If you are considering fostering young puppies or kittens, you must



ANGIE KNOST

Plan and prepare

Once you've chosen your foster pet, you'll need to get copies of his records, especially vaccination and health paperwork. Double-check to make sure the pet is up-to-date on vaccinations and de-worming, and also make sure the animal has been sterilized. Unaltered pets should not be considered for fostering; the chances of creating more unwanted litters of puppies or kittens is not worth the risk.

Because you can't predict the animal's reactions to the ride home, plan to transport him in an airline-approved crate. (Crates that are not labeled as such are often not as durable or escape-proof.) If you are fostering dogs, this same crate can be used during the crate-training process; visit www.petsforlife.org for tips. Do not let the pet out of the crate until he or she is safely inside your home.

Early in the process, I provide my foster dogs with an ID tag that simply reads "Foster Dog Bahleda," followed by my address and phone number. I put this tag on the dog's collar even before I leave the shelter, just in case the dog escapes en route to my home. This is critical even if pets are microchipped. I also

make sure my home has been prepared with leashes, food, extra bowls, blankets, toys, and an appropriately sized crate before the dog arrives.

First things first

It's imperative that the animal should not be left unattended in your home for the first one to two weeks, and the animal should never be left unattended with other pets or children. I have heard too many stories of seemingly wonderful dogs seriously injuring or killing other pets while unattended. Remember that this animal is a somewhat unknown entity and should therefore be supervised constantly.

During a dog's first weeks in my home—the "constant supervision" stage—I like to leash the dog and attach the leash to my waist. This way I am always there to encourage positive behavior (like chewing on appropriate toys, urinating outside, playing appropriately with other pets, etc.) and to discourage unwanted behavior.

While I like this method best—it promotes trust, facilitates bonding, and helps teach a dog to come when called—sometimes it isn't possible.

If a dog isn't leash-trained or appears afraid of the leash, you can ensure he stays near you by using baby gates to block the doorways of the room you're in. You will need to stay alert; a frightened dog who is not on a leash may simply jump the gate rather than turn to you for reassurance.

Having the dog on a leash also presents opportunities to begin simple obedience training. Talk to your shelter's trainer for information on positive reinforcement-based training methods, or, if you have the time and money, enroll your foster pet in a basic group obedience class. Group classes are great for teaching not just obedience but also positive social skills.

When cats first come home, they should be confined to a safe, well-ventilated, comfortable room with fresh food, water, toys, and a clean litter box. Other pets should be introduced to the foster cat only once she feels comfortable, is socializing well with you, and seems to be adapting well overall in the room. Any dog being introduced to a foster cat should be leashed for the cat's protection, even if the dog gets along well and is non-aggressive with other cats (see the "101" on p. 18).

Promote that pet!

Once an animal has been in my home for a week and I've determined that there are no serious behavior issues—and that he would make a good companion for someone—I call the shelter to report my positive findings. This information may help elicit interest and, eventually, an adoption. (As mentioned in "The Skinny on Behavior Assessments" on p. 24, any questionable behavior should be reported to the shelter as it occurs, and if the behavior is determined to pose a threat to anyone in your household, the animal should be returned to the shelter for further evaluation.)



ANGIE KNOST

Before bringing your foster pet home, find out whether you will be responsible for paying for veterinary care.

Although most of the animals I foster are listed on Petfinder.com, I create fliers noting the pet's positive attributes and post them at various businesses (with their approval, of course). Colorful, cute photos, along with creative graphics, tend to draw the most interest. Remember to pro-

vide your contact information so anyone interested in adopting can reach you. (And make sure to ask the shelter ahead of time whether this is acceptable.) Although the shelter is ultimately responsible for making the final decisions regarding the permanent homing of the pet, I still list my phone number on the fliers and encourage interested adopters to come and meet the pet either in my home or at the shelter, when I can be present to supervise and answer questions. As a foster parent in these situations, you can be the first and best line of defense in the screening process.

Use the right tools

Appropriate equipment can help make your fostering experience positive and efficient. Having a variety of sizes of safe, durable, airline-approved crates is essential (unless you are only fostering animals of a similar size, like cats or toy breeds). When fostering dogs, proper crating is also an essential part of houstraining (see the "101" on p. 18).

A high, concrete-floored, roofed (i.e., "escape-proof") kennel with adequate shade and shelter can also come in handy, especially at those times during the "constant supervision" stage when you can't be con-

stantly supervising. A kennel or pen, however, should not be used as the main source of housing for the dog; dogs are social animals and must be able to spend a good deal of time with you in your home if they are to learn the lessons that will best prepare them for life with their new family. This is just one of many reasons that tying or chaining a dog should never be considered a viable form of confinement.

Young, energetic dogs and cats will inevitably find things in your home to chew on, chase, or destroy, so it's essential to provide them with a variety of safe substitutes. I have a "doggie toy box" in my living room, and once my foster dogs discover that they have access to anything and everything in the box, they seem happy with that and never once take or destroy anything that doesn't belong to them. I also keep a few favorite toys in the dog's crate; Kongs and other safe, durable toys that can be stuffed with kibble or healthy treats can serve a twofold purpose of satisfying the need to chew and providing ongoing stimulation.

Create a social butterfly

Socialization is especially important for foster dogs because young pups deprived of the chance to socialize with other dogs tend to develop more problematic behaviors. That said, unless a dog suffers from severe fear or aggression (and remember, aggressive and fearful dogs do not make the best foster pets), he or she will benefit from exposure to a variety of positive situations and settings, regardless of age.

Once I am familiar with my foster dogs' personalities and they have learned to walk nicely on a leash and respond well to simple obedience commands, I take them for a short trip to PetSmart, Petco, and other pet supply stores that welcome well-behaved, leashed dogs. These "doggie adventures" provide



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PETER CASELLA

me with an opportunity to reinforce obedience commands and see how the dog will react in a foreign environment loaded with distractions of all kinds. It also helps me learn which commands or social skills the dog excels at as well as identify those that perhaps need a little more work.

The benefits of taking your foster dog through a basic, positive reinforcement-based group obedience class cannot be stressed enough. Cats will benefit most from socializing with you, your family and guests, and non-aggressive pets already in your home.

Know your role

Although the pet you choose to foster should have been provided with vaccinations, de-worming, and a basic health check before leaving

the shelter, accidents, injuries, and illness are a fact of life. You need to consider your options and discuss your thoughts on the matter with shelter staff prior to bringing an animal home.

Most shelters and rescue organizations do not have the funds available to treat every animal, especially when the injury or illness is severe, so it will likely be up to you to pay for any medical bills incurred while the animal is in your care.

If your foster pet becomes ill or injured while in your home, call the shelter immediately. If the illness or injury is common or minor, many shelters will have the personnel and products available to make a diagnosis and provide basic treatment. If it's more severe and requires veterinary care, ask the shelter staff for advice on

where to take the pet. Many shelters either have a vet on staff or prefer to work with a particular vet in the community.

Severe injuries such as broken bones and severe illnesses such as parvovirus can end up costing thousands of dollars to treat, so know your financial limits, and be prepared to discuss treatment methods, options, and costs with the veterinarian. Be sure to ask for an estimate, and let the veterinarian and staff know that you are fostering the animal. If the injury or illness is so severe that euthanasia is recommended, call the shelter to discuss the situation before making the final decision. Remember, even though the animal is residing in your home, the shelter is still responsible for making important decisions regarding the pet's welfare.

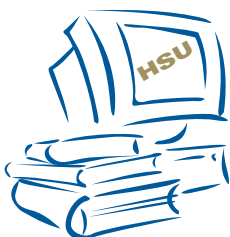
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Know the shelter's role

In addition to providing the initial behavior assessment, a simple health exam, initial vaccinations, de-worming and spay/neuter services, the shelter should also provide you with clear, written foster care guidelines, a foster application form, a foster care agreement to be signed by both parties, information on adoption procedures, and any other paperwork necessary to assist with the transition of the animal's care and location.

Before the start of your fostering career, the organization should interview you and inspect your home to determine the safety of your environment and assess your ability to properly care for pets. Shelter staff should also check with your vet to make sure your own pets are healthy and up-to-date on vaccinations. This home visit and interview process will provide you with the opportunity to ask questions and address concerns about liability. (For foster programs that are just getting started, shelters and foster caregivers will want to look into liability clauses that an attorney can address.)

In addition, staff should be willing to provide you with a small amount of the food the pet has been fed while at the shelter; this will help ease the transition and prevent new foods from wreaking gastrointestinal havoc on your foster pet. If possible, they should also be willing to transfer any toys, collars, or other items belonging to the pet when he was surrendered.

The shelter should provide periodic checkups on the pet's well-being, and, given sufficient resources, may agree to follow up on the pet once he or she has been adopted. But your offer to assist with follow-up will probably be much appreciated by busy shelter staff. Shelter employees should also

be willing to promote adoption of the pet as they would if the pet were still housed at their facility.

Find Fido's (or Fifi's) lifelong home

Finally, the day has arrived! The perfect family has come to see your foster pet, and they want to adopt. First of all, give yourself a pat on the back for the time and effort you were willing to spend to get to this point. Then call the shelter to make the proper arrangements.

Policies and procedures vary from shelter to shelter; some may require potential adopters to come to their facility for an interview and the paperwork process, while others may allow you to be responsible for the adoption and screening process. Decisions regarding who should be responsible for reference checks, vaccination checks on existing pets, home visits, and the like should be determined at the beginning of the fostering period, and you must be willing and prepared to comply with the policies and procedures of the adopting organization.

Remain a resource

Once your foster pet has been adopted and placed in his lifelong home, you may still be called upon for advice and information. After all, the pet may have spent a great deal of time in your home, and any information you have acquired about the pet's behavior, health, temperament, and training will help ease the transition. If the shelter's procedures allow for it, follow up on how your foster pets are doing, both shortly after they've been adopted and then again after the animal has been given time to adapt to his new home. Ask adopting families if you can call them from time to time to check on the pet. I also ask adopters to contact me occa-

sionally to let me know how the pet is doing.

In fostering, there is no greater reward than receiving a phone call from a family years after they have adopted one of your foster pets, telling you how much they love and appreciate their pet. After all the effort, consideration, lessons, love, and learning that have taken place in my life over the years, it is this kind of feedback that makes it all worthwhile. 🌸

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Visit www.petsforlife.org for more tips on crate-training, animal introductions, and pet behavior issues.



After she has fostered a dog through to adoption, author Melissa Bahleda asks the dog's new family to contact her from time to time to let her know how he's doing. Here she visits with Kaily a year after her adoption.