

Immeasurable Heartache Saved With This Single Act of Love

To do a good deed is a most glorious sign of love. It may have its bittersweet moments and sometimes even be called a failure, but it's almost sure to save a life and be a rousing success for all involved.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- A growing number of dog rescues are foster-based these days, and the biggest challenge for these organizations is finding dependable foster homes
- Becoming a foster parent is a great way to help homeless dogs; fostered pets are better prepared for adoption, and less likely to develop fear or anxiety-based behavior problems
- It's important to consider your time, energy, and resources before deciding to foster a dog, and honestly assess your environment for its suitability as a foster home
- Puppies are a special challenge, so it's important if you foster a very young dog to ensure he's socialized at the right time, is free of parasites and disease, and receives veterinary care as required

Foster-based dog rescues — organizations that find foster homes for animals rather than housing them in their own facilities — are becoming more common.¹ The arrangement avoids the cost of operating a building (e.g., rent or mortgage expense, property taxes, utilities, cleaning services, etc.), which in turn means more money to care of the dogs, such as food, veterinary care, toys, etc.

The biggest challenge for these organizations is finding dependable foster homes, so if you're considering becoming a foster pet parent, now is a great time to get involved.

Fostering Makes a Huge Difference for Homeless Pets

Living in a home with a family better prepares pets for adoption than institutional living. It's also much less stressful for the animal. Fostered pets are much less likely to develop **fear or anxiety-related behavior problems** than animals who spend time in a shelter environment.

In addition, foster families are better able to assess a pet's true temperament because they can observe the animal extensively in a home environment. Brief visits with an anxious or fearful shelter resident are often not adequate to learn the pet's true nature.

Also, many foster parents spend time working with their furry charges to help overcome physical or emotional challenges or training deficits — for example, house soiling.

Fostering in a home in which there are children and other pets provides an animal the chance to be socialized to a wider range of family configurations. This opens up his possibilities for adoption to a greater number of families. Or, if the foster pet can't be adequately socialized to small children, for example, the shelter or rescue will know this particular animal must be adopted to a family with no young kids.

If an animal has been rescued from an **abusive situation**, her foster family can build a bridge from her past (where humans were scary), to a hopeful future with people who are caring and loving.

What to Expect From Fostering

This will depend a great deal on what type of pet you agree to foster, and the circumstances of the animal's life up to that point. General pet rules apply, of course. Dogs require more time and energy than cats. Puppies need more attention than almost any other type of pet.

If your foster dog is recuperating from an illness or injury, she might need nursing care or extra TLC. If she has no manners, she'll need your help to learn **basic obedience commands** like sit, stay and down.

A large breed adult dog who has lived up till now banished to a backyard and ignored, will need all the basics including daily walks and exercise. Plus, he'll need to be house trained, leash trained, obedience trained, socialized — and there may also be behavior problems to address.

If you have the time and resources necessary to turn a rather unmanageable, large breed shelter dog into a balanced, mostly well-behaved pet, not only will you feel tremendous gratification, but you will also very likely save the life of that dog by dramatically improving the likelihood she'll be adopted.

A Few Questions to Consider Before Taking the Plunge

Fostering is a different ballgame from adopting — it takes a different level of courage and dedication to foster a dog.

Rescues, shelters, and adoptive families rely on fosters to learn as much as possible about the dogs in their care, which is why it's so important for all the human members of your household to be onboard with the fostering process. It's also very important, if you have other pets at home, that they're generally friendly to unfamiliar dogs. Questions to ask yourself and other family members:

- **Do you have the time and interest necessary to get to know your foster dog?**

It's your job as a foster parent to discover what the dog likes, what she's afraid of, and what training she needs from you. Do you have the willingness, time, and patience for this?

- **Can you be patient with a dog who's had no training?**

Most dogs enter shelters as strays, so not much is known about them. Is your foster dog housetrained? Leash trained? Are you willing to fill in all the gaps in his training, including working through fear or aggression issues?

- **Is your home environment a good place for a dog?**

Foster dogs often thrive in a calmer environment. Some may do well with another dog to learn from, while others do best as the only dog or pet in the home. Each dog is an individual, and not every foster dog will be a match for you and your home environment.

Other considerations: are the other pets in the household friendly? If you have kids, do they know how to behave around dogs, especially new arrivals? Do you have a yard and/or are you willing to take your dog outside to potty?

- **Can you say good-bye to your foster dog?**

For some people, especially those fostering for the first time, saying good-bye can be very difficult. After all, you're the one who put in the time, energy, effort, and love required to improve your dog's chances of adoption.

When a new family is ready to bring "your" dog home, it's bittersweet. It's hard to let go. But as soon as you do, you can make room for another foster dog in need of TLC.

4 Recommendations for Fostering a Puppy

These tips are offered by veterinarian Dr. Amanda Dykstra, writing for veterinary journal *dvm360*:²

- **Manners minded means more adoptable!** — The most critical time period for **socialization** in puppies is from ages 7 to 14 weeks, when the part of their brain that senses fear is forming. Your foster puppy needs to have lots of positive experiences during this time. I believe continuing to socialize puppies daily until they're a year of age is important, but this timeframe is critical.

Follow the rule of seven: Try to have your puppy experience seven new textures, tastes, people, sounds or surfaces every day, and make sure each experience is filled with treats and praise. Be sure to include all sorts of experiences and people: tall, short, children, people in wheelchairs and so on. The more you can get your puppy out, the braver he or she will feel in the face of new experiences.

Another way to ensure that your foster does not fail is to engage in basic training. A puppy who knows how to sit, stay, come, refrain from jumping on people and walk nicely on a leash is much more likely to get a furrever home, so take your foster to puppy class and work with him at home.

- **Avoid creepy crawlies** — Sometimes foster dogs can come with some unwanted visitors. Mites, fleas, ticks, fungus, bacteria, parasites, and other critters can hitch a ride on a shelter dog.

Watch for signs of infestation such as red, itchy skin; hair loss; soft stool; runny nose or coughing and general lethargy. If you see these signs, call your veterinarian or the shelter.

- **When to worry** — Fostering a puppy can be overwhelming and scary if you don't know what to look for. While a veterinarian is always available to help and give advice, there are some situations that are urgent but not emergent that can wait till the next day, while some are true emergencies.

Parvovirus, which causes bloody diarrhea, fever, lack of energy, loss of appetite and vomiting, is an emergency. Go immediately to the veterinarian.

Fading puppy syndrome — which causes low birth weight, failure to gain weight, diarrhea, continual crying, painful abdomen, paddling, vomiting, salivation, or difficulty breathing — is an emergency.

- **An ounce of prevention** — Most infectious diseases that used to cause death and severe illness in puppies can now be prevented by one or two well timed immunizations.

My vaccine protocol for puppies is to administer a first round of distemper, parvo and adenovirus before 12 weeks of age, usually around 9 to 10 weeks. I give the second round between 15 and 16 weeks. Two weeks after the second round, I titer to ensure the dog has been **immunized and not just vaccinated**. Never vaccinate an unwell puppy.

When it comes to rabies, I prefer to give the first vaccine at 6 months, and then as required by law, a booster one year later and every three years thereafter. Until immunity is established through titering at the two- to four-week mark after the pup's second round of shots, use extreme care if you take her to places where other dogs congregate, including:

- Pet stores
- Dog parks
- Puppy or obedience classes
- Doggy daycare or boarding facilities
- Grooming shops

Also, don't let your foster pup come in contact with the poop of other dogs or wild animals, and properly dispose of his poop as well. If he's vomiting or has diarrhea or has been exposed to an ill dog, keep him away from any area where he might come in contact with other dogs or wild animals.

Unvaccinated dogs should not be exposed to ill dogs or those with questionable health or immunization histories. And if you are in contact with a sick dog, avoid contact with other dogs until you've washed your hands thoroughly and changed clothes, if necessary.

Falling for Your Foster

A huge benefit of fostering is the positive domino effect it creates. The more people willing to open their homes to foster pets, the more pets local shelters can accommodate, and for longer periods. This gives each precious pet the best shot at finding a new home.

But sometimes, foster parents discover that the pet who came into their home for a temporary stay turns out to be a perfect fit for their family, and they decide to keep him or her. This is called a "foster failure," but it's really anything but!

One final thought on fostering: Be sure to be fair to your own pets while hosting a foster. Try never to stretch yourself so thin with fosters that you neglect your own furry family members.

Sources and References

¹ [Veterinarians.org, August 30, 2023](#)

² [dvm360 Handout: Tips to keep your foster puppy in tiptop shape](#)