

Becoming a foster



parent:

Are you ready?



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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-



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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.



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



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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.

