

# Fostering fundamentals

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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.



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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



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## 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](http://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.)



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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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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.

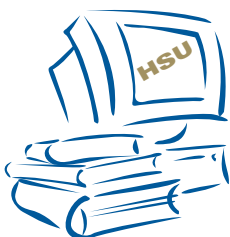
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### Know the shelter's role

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](http://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.