

Fostering Success

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For many homeless dogs, foster homes are the springboard from which they find that special home they've been waiting for. People get into foster care for many reasons. Maybe they're not financially ready to adopt a dog, they want to help homeless dogs, they enjoy dog ownership but cannot care for a dog 12 months of the year, they want the training experience that working with many different dogs provides, their dog enjoys the companionship of foster brothers and sisters, they feel strongly about promoting a certain breed, or maybe it just plain makes them feel good. Whatever your reasons for doing foster care, it can be a wonderful and fulfilling experience.

When I work with new foster homes, I always tell them that there's no "wrong" way to provide foster care. No matter how you care for your foster dog, you are saving a life, and that's wonderful. That said, I think **it's very important to foster in such a way that you put the dog's best interests first.**

You see, **many foster homes get it backwards.** It's easy to do. When the dog comes into our home, we treat him or her just like one of our own pets. We welcome them in and encourage them to sleep on our bed and snuggle with us. They become comfortable and begin to blossom. We take them to adoption days and share their picture on Facebook, and eventually they find that perfect adoptive home.

And their heart breaks. You see, **from the dog's perspective, he was already home.** He has become attached to you, and now you appear to be abandoning him. How is he to know that you were just a foster? How is he to know that this new family isn't going to do the same exact thing?

Separation and attachment issues are two of the most common issues I am hired to work with in adopted dogs, and these issues are far, far more common in dogs who come from foster homes than from shelters. I don't think this is a coincidence.

As a foster, it's important to think about what you're teaching the dog. Are you really preparing that dog to succeed in his new home?

Remember, most of us in the rescue community are truly "dog people." We don't mind fur on the couch or paw prints on the linens. We don't blink when a new puppy cries for half an hour in his crate or a senior dog needs to go outside multiple times in the middle of the night because he just can't hold it anymore. We naturally know how to set dogs up for success, gating off the litter box and blocking access to the front door. We read body language well, and subconsciously adjust our own body to make a timid dog more comfortable or redirect an aggressive dog before he escalates from mild warnings.

We do all of this, but your foster dog's new family won't. And we need to prepare our foster dogs for that.

I want my foster dog to think that his new home is way cooler than mine was. That means that I set him up for success right from the start. I don't know whether my foster's new family will allow him to get on the furniture, so I teach him to sleep on a dog bed and stay off my sofa. Sure, my dogs are allowed on the couch. That doesn't mean I need to extend the same privilege to my foster dog. I don't know whether the foster dog's new family will have a fenced yard, so I teach him to toilet quickly on a leash. I don't know whether my foster dog's new family will want him loose in their house overnight, so I teach him to be content sleeping in a crate.

As much as I love my foster dogs, they are not *my* dogs. Treating them as if they are is nothing less than selfish. I am only a caregiver, preparing them for bigger and better things. So I treat them differently than my own dogs, caring for them kindly and fairly but not letting them get too attached to myself or my other dogs. I train them and teach them that people are gentle and trustworthy. I teach them that good things happen when people handle their paws, mouth, or ears, that wonderful things happen when people reach towards their food or toys, that crates are comfortable and safe places to rest quietly, that sitting and looking at people works wonders, and that calm behavior in the house results in great rewards. I take them on field trips and introduce them to new people and places. They learn so much.

And then they get adopted, and they go home. Their new family gives them more privileges and attention than they had from me, and they quickly become attached. They bond with their new owners, and while they're very happy to see me whenever we encounter one another for the rest of their lives, they are also quite clear whose dog they are. My heart breaks for dogs at adoption days who only have eyes for their foster parent, because I know that the dog is going to feel heartbreak when they get adopted.

Consider what you're preparing your foster dog for. Teach him to succeed. Then let him go gently, and watch him blossom under the love and care of his new family. There is no better feeling, and no bigger service you can do for that dog.