



Foster a Dog

What's so great about fostering a dog? Easy--the fantastic dog love you get for your effort. But that's not all. Here are eight more reasons why every person on the planet should think about fostering a dog.

- Fostering gives a dog a second chance at life.
- Fostering a dog is a wonderful, life-affirming project for the entire family (although singles and couples can foster, too, of course).
- Fostering a dog costs virtually nothing.
- Fostering a dog is fun.
- Fostering a dog is rewarding.
- Fostering can be done anywhere--in a city or suburb, a house or apartment.
- Fostering a dog can take place whenever you are ready.
- Fostering a dog offers the company of canines to those unable to make a long-term commitment.

So what exactly is fostering and how do you get started?

History and Background

The idea of fostering was born in response to a problem: overcrowded animal shelters.

Puppies and kittens entering animal shelters under eight weeks of age used to be (and in some communities, still are) routinely killed because they were too young to be adopted. Shelters lacked the staff or adequate space to give these fragile infants the time and care they needed to get them to an adoptable age. The solution: a short term foster home to provide a healthy, germ free environment and lots of tender, loving care. When the animal reached eight weeks, it could be returned to the shelter for placement.

Many shelters have expanded this idea to include fostering for animals in other situations. They may foster cats and dogs recovering from medical conditions (e.g., a broken leg) who just need a few weeks in a loving home to mend. She may have stopped eating due

to the stress of a shelter environment and need the security of a home situation to get back on her feed. The dog may have a minor behavior problem (jumping up, mouthiness) that a foster family can work on to make the animal more appealing to adopters. Or the shelter may simply have a space crunch and want to find a short-term housing alternative for some of their charges.

In many communities today, foster networks actually take the place of animal shelters. Such networks are generally led by no-kill rescue groups who take cats and dogs out of animal control facilities or traditional animal shelters, place them in foster homes, and then find the pets permanent homes through their own adoption events, publicity, word of mouth, or advertising. In some cases, foster families interview and screen potential adopters right from their own home.

What Is Involved In Fostering?

The agency responsible for the foster dog vaccinates and generally alters the animal prior to foster placements. The agency also foots the bill for any necessary medical treatment he/she may require while under your care. In some cases, you pay for the dog food; in others, that's covered too.

The length of the fostering experience depends on the circumstance. A puppy foster will last only a few weeks. If you are fostering for a rescue group who needs to find a home for the dog before it can leave your care, it may take several months.

The great thing about fostering is, you can ask for a dog who fits your lifestyle. If you live in an apartment, you can ask for or an older animal who is low energy or a dog in medical recovery who needs to be kept quiet.

If you are an active family, you can ask for a dog who needs lots of walks and plenty of exercise. If someone in your family is comfortable working with dogs, you can help a dog with some basic obedience or teach him some tricks.

And you can do your fostering when it's convenient for you--over summer vacation, a long holiday or whenever.

In most cases, it's fine if you already have a dog, as long as your dog and the foster dog are both healthy and well behaved around other dogs.

Fostering Pros and Cons

There are a few downsides to fostering.

To foster a puppy, someone must be at home during the day to care for the pup. This is not an undertaking for a family in which both parents are working.

The dogs you will foster probably will not be perfect. Some may need to be housetrained. Some dogs may be un-schooled in other ways. For example, they may be rambunctious or shy, they may be inclined to jump up on people or on furniture. To some degree, these things will depend on the dog's age and breed, but problem behaviors may be what landed them in the shelter in the first place. Fostering will require some patience, love and TLC.

But these issues are far outweighed by the benefits and rewards of fostering. The addition of a dog brings immeasurable richness and joy to the household. Foster dogs will repay you for your patience and love by giving back ten times more love of their own. And when the dog goes off to a loving new home for life, your heart will swell with joy. What could possibly be more gratifying than to save a life and create a "happy ever after" ending?

Where To Go To Foster

To find out more about fostering in your community, look for animal welfare organizations in the yellow pages under "Animals" or "Humane Society." Local veterinarians might also have a handle on animal rescue groups in your area.

Carrie Anderson--Foster Mom Extraordinaire

Carrie Anderson adores dogs. The Anderson family (including Carrie's husband and two children) has four dogs of its own and there are usually a few foster dogs on hand as well. According to Carrie, in the past five years they've never gone longer than a month without at least one foster.

Currently, Carrie and her family are caring for a one-eyed puppy, a daschund mix and an Australian shepherd. But this assortment is not exactly the norm.

"We live on a few acres and I have a big, fenced-in yard. So I usually volunteer to foster the giant breeds--the Danes, Rottweilers, Rhodesian Ridgebacks," Carrie says. "I also like to foster the dogs that need special attention, dogs that you can see have lots of potential but just need a little extra help. The Aussie I have now is really shy, but she's improving and she'll be ready to go in a few months. I recently had a 10-month-old Great Dane. He was a nice dog but hadn't been trained and was getting pushy. I taught him some manners and now he's with a great family--he even has his own website!" (www.packet-level.com/chad.htm)

"The dogs that go into foster are so thankful for your love, it's just really gratifying to be able to help them. But you can get attached. The most common question people ask me is, 'after spending so much time with these dogs, how do you give them up?' I always say, if I don't let them go, I can't help anyone else."