

## **Evidence Supporting a Home-Based Approach to Pet Sheltering (Fostering Shelter Pets)**

### **Statement from the Association of Shelter Veterinarians, 2022:**

Because confinement has negative impacts on animal behavior, reducing the duration of time spent in cages or kennels is critical. Foster care is the preferred method of housing for dogs and cats who do not need care that must be provided in-shelter (e.g. for safety, legal, medical or behavioral reasons) because it allows for regular social interaction and for animals to choose where and how they spend their time (Gunter et al. 2019 PeerJ).

### **Foster = better pet wellbeing**

- [Cat Foster Program Outcomes: Behavior, Stress, and Cat–Human Interaction](#)
  - Foster cats did not display decreased social behavior, increased fear or aggression, or increased cortisol levels while in the foster home, even for as little as 1 night. Even short-term cat fostering does not appear to be more stressful for cats than staying in the shelter.
  - Short-term fostering of cats may also help improve adoption outcomes.
- [An actigraphy-based comparison of shelter dog and owned dog activity patterns](#)
  - Animal shelters tend to be stressful environments for dogs because of the sights, sounds, odors, and schedules that characterize shelter living.
  - The shelter environment may inhibit dogs from resting. Dogs in the shelter were significantly more active than owned dogs.
- [Stress in Shelter Dogs and the Use of Foster Care to Improve Animal Welfare](#)
  - Cortisol levels were lower for dogs living in foster homes than in the shelter.
  - Living in a foster home is less stressful for a dog than living in a shelter. The increased use of foster care programs in animal shelters could be an effective way to reduce stress in shelter pets.
- [Psychological Stress, Its Reduction, and Long-Term Consequences: What Studies with Laboratory Animals Might Teach Us about Life in the Dog Shelter](#)
  - Stressors encountered in the shelter may shape later behavior in unwanted ways.
  - In a stressful, competitive environment like a shelter, behavioral traits such as reduced sociality, increased reactivity and aggression, and re-focusing skills relevant to basic survival at the expense of “higher level” skills tend to develop disproportionately

- [Foster care has an impact on dogs' welfare and adoption](#)
  - Dogs in foster care showed significant improvements on 6 out of 21 behaviors associated with well-being after one night in foster care compared to their initial assessment at three to five weeks in the shelter. They were perceived as more happy, relaxed and less anxious.
  - Dogs in foster care showed significant improvements on 17 out of 21 behaviors associated with well-being after 7 days in foster care compared to their initial assessment in the shelter. They were perceived as more cheerful, more calm, friendlier to people and demonstrating less shaking/trembling and repetitive behaviors, among others.
- [Characterizing Human–Dog Attachment Relationships in Foster and Shelter Environments as a Potential Mechanism for Achieving Mutual Wellbeing and Success](#)
  - Foster increased the likelihood that a dog will experience the establishment of a secure attachment to a caretaker before final adoption, enabling them to practice forming bonds with humans.
  - The proportion of secure attachment styles in shelter dogs included in this study were significantly lower than the proportion of secure attachment styles previously reported for owned dogs. Dogs in foster homes formed secure attachments to their caretakers at rates similar to those of owned dogs living in homes.
- [Changes associated with improved outcomes for cats entering RSPCA Queensland shelters from 2011 to 2016](#)
  - Foster care provided increased opportunities for initially poorly socialized cats to develop social behaviors, provide care for very young kittens, increased the network of potential adopters and led to less euthanasia.
- [Evaluating Cognitive and Behavioral Outcomes in Conjunction with the Secure Base Effect for Dogs in Shelter and Foster Environments](#)
  - Foster dogs have significantly higher levels of attachment and attention-seeking behaviors when compared with dogs living in the shelter.
  - Secure attachment in foster homes was associated with improved persistence and performance on a point following task.
- [Factors Associated with High Live Release for Dogs at a Large, Open-Admission, Municipal Shelter](#)
  - Dogs returned from foster care had a 70% reduction in health concerns, compared with dogs sent to foster.
  - Foster care increased the odds of live release by about five-fold for all dogs
- [Evaluation of a pheromone collar on canine behaviors during transition from foster homes to a training kennel in juvenile Military Working Dogs](#)
  - Moving a dog from a foster home to a kennel environment increases their stress levels, with or without pheromone collars.
- [Pre-mortem risk factors for mortality in kittens less than 8 weeks old at a dedicated kitten nursery](#)
  - Foster care programs help to mitigate concerns regarding disease exposure and transmission, inadequate nutrition, and stress

- [Assessing the welfare of shelter dogs by studying their sleep/rest patterns](#)
  - Shelter dogs have more and shorter sleep-wake cycles than dogs in domestic situations
  - After two weeks the dogs weighed significantly less than they did on arriving at the shelter, which could be a sign that they are experiencing stress
- [Factors Informing Outcomes for Older Cats and Dogs in Animal Shelters](#)
  - Having a strong foster care system that is equipped to address the needs of older animals can help increase live outcomes.
- [A Prospective Study of Growth Rate, Disease Incidence, and Mortality in Kittens Less than 9 Weeks of Age in Shelter and Foster Care](#)
  - Foster programs for kittens increase welfare in kittens due to increased observations and early interventions.

## Short-term foster

- [The Influence of Brief Outing and Temporary Fostering Programs on Shelter Dog Welfare](#)
  - Outings and temporary fostering stays increased dogs' likelihood of adoption by five and over 14 times, respectively.
  - When intervention programs of either type had greater percentages of community members participating, these programs were more successful.
  - Bites were very rare, happening on less than 1% of outings.
- [Evaluating the effects of a temporary fostering program on shelter dog welfare](#)
  - Dogs' cortisol: creatinine ratios (stress hormone) dropped significantly during their overnight fostering stay, and returned only to baseline levels after their return to the shelter.
  - Dogs had their longest bouts of rest during sleepovers, followed by in the shelter after their sleepovers.
- [Foster field trips improve welfare in dogs](#)
  - During field trips of 1 hour or more, significant improvements in behavior were shown on 15 of 21 survey items, which included trembling, barking and repetitive behaviors such as jumping and walking in circles
- [Investigating the impact of brief outings on the welfare of dogs living in US shelters](#)
  - Field trips do not provide the same reduction in stress as previously shown with overnight fostering. Nevertheless, short-term outings may provide shelter dogs with greater adoption visibility and assist in foster recruitment and, thus, should be further explored.

## Fostering and safety

- [Emergency Fostering of Dogs From Animal Shelters During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Shelter Practices, Foster Caregiver Engagement, and Dog Outcomes](#)
  - Bites to a person or animal rarely occurred (1.1% of foster experiences led to a bite, and this was divided fairly equally between those to humans and other pets)

- (Also see The Influence of Brief Outing and Temporary Fostering Programs on Shelter Dog Welfare, above)

## Foster leads to a decrease in adoption return rates

- [Adoption Can Be a Risky Business: Risk Factors Predictive of Dogs Adopted from RSPCA Queensland Being Returned](#)
  - Spending time in foster care before adoption time was associated with a lower risk of adoption return. Risk of return appeared similar for dogs adopted after shorter and longer periods in foster care, and even a foster care period of 7 to 13 days appeared beneficial. Foster care appears to provide a preparatory basis for the transition to a home environment.
- [Evaluation of a novel dog adoption program in 2 US communities](#)
  - Seven percent of dogs who were adopted through the [Adoption Ambassador program](#) were returned to the shelter, compared to 17% of dogs adopted directly from the shelter.
  - Giving foster parents greater responsibility for getting their charges adopted enlarged the geographical pool of potential adopters as opposed to programs that leave the adoption process solely to paid staff
- [Shelter and rescue programmes associated with higher live release and lower return rates for dogs](#)
  - Having a robust foster program is associated with higher live outcomes and lower rates of return.
- [Placing medium and large dogs with behavioral challenges in foster homes](#)
  - Return rate of dogs in the study: 9.6%; Shelter's overall return rate for adopted dogs: 13%
- [When and Why Cats Are Returned to Shelters](#)
  - Cats adopted from foster care had the lowest return rate (7.02%) of all groups, which included adoption from group housing (16.61%), cats in single caging (13.42%) and cats adopted from offsite locations (10.99%).
- [Some factors influencing adoption of sheltered dogs](#)
  - Temporary Adoption Programs had a significant positive effect in reducing the return rate when the final adopter was the same person who had "temporarily" adopted the dog

## Fostering leads to better human wellbeing

- [Examining How Dog 'Acquisition' Affects Physical Activity and Psychosocial Well-Being: Findings from the BuddyStudy Pilot Trial](#)
  - This study examined how fostering a rescue dog affected the humans' physical activity and psychosocial well-being. Nearly half of study participants saw large increases in physical activity and nearly three-quarters saw improvements in mood after fostering for six weeks. More than half met someone new in their neighborhood because of their foster dog.
- [Companion Dog Foster Caregiver Program for Older Veterans at the VA Maryland Health Care System: A Feasibility Study](#)

- Fostering a companion dog can improve physical activity, health, and quality of life in older veterans.
- [Companion Animal Fostering as Health Promotion: A Literature Review](#)
  - Companion animal fostering has the potential to promote the health of the individuals, families, and communities who provide foster homes.

### Summary of the positive benefits of foster programs:

- Foster reduces pets' stress levels.
- Pets in foster homes have improved well being compared to pets in the shelter.
- Organizations can learn more about pets' personalities while they're in foster homes.
- Foster placement leads to increases in positive outcomes for pets.
- The pet gets an advocate who often helps market them for adoption and continues to be involved in their life at the shelter.
- A foster may have more time to care for an animal and monitor its medical and behavioral needs than busy shelter staff.
- The shelter gets information on the pet's behavior in a home, which can be different than what is seen in the shelter.
- It increases shelter pets' visibility in the community.
- Animals in foster homes are more securely attached to people than are animals in the shelter, and the attachment bonds animals made in foster homes can lead to more positive outcomes
- The opportunity to get great photos of the pet in a home environment and out and about.
- It leads to a quieter shelter, which benefits the staff and resident pets.
- Pets going to foster homes help to open up space at the shelter.
- Foster programs save shelters money.
- Pets aren't exposed to as many pathogens as in a shelter.
- Pets who do get sick tend to recover faster in a foster home than in the shelter due to the lessened stress.
- Short-term foster options are the "gateway" to more fostering. Not everyone can foster long-term. Short-term programs lower the bar and allow more people to participate in fostering.
- A foster home enables animals to get better rest than in a shelter.
- Fostered pets are returned from adoption less often.
- Using foster programs, organizations engage with their community in a positive way.