



Important Steps to Safely Foster a Rescue Dog

Rescue groups beg and plead for volunteers all the time and much of the time we are so grateful when someone steps forward that we do not even consider how important the first few weeks of a rescued dog's life actually are. These first weeks begin to lay the foundation for the rest of the dog's life. New homes are

approved as if we are giving up our first born but any old person who raises his/her hand is ok to foster.

What happens during the first days and weeks at the foster home can make or break how quickly the dog is adopted and how successful he will be in his new forever home. A rescued dog usually comes from a stressful situation that doesn't even include the baggage from their previous life. It is the responsibility of the volunteer foster to provide proper interaction and socialization to ensure the dog is set up to succeed as well as ready for a new home.



Foster Blanch on the left - home dogs on the right.

Foster dog came to me almost frozen in fear and very dog reactive. Her dog reactivity caused her to fail her eval at the shelter then add to that her stress from shelter life and the poor girl was a mess. Today, I consider this dog 100% dog friendly and solid although some old stress and fear still lingers. Many times we confuse dominance behaviors and stress behaviors as the same. A dog that reacts toward other dogs is more likely very scared. It does not take more than a couple bad dog experiences as a puppy to create a problem as described.

When I accept a dog to foster for a Rescue Group I want everything to go smoothly with the least amount of bother and headache. I like to think I am only a short stop between the shelter and the new forever home. More often than not it takes some preparation, a plan and diligence for me and the dog to be successful. Since I am willing to foster I owe it to the dog and the future new forever home to put my heart into it. During the last 5 years I have brought many strange dogs into my home, much to the dismay of my existing pack and human family, but I do think we are all better for it. My own dogs are more socialized than ever.

Important Steps to Safely Foster a Rescue Dog CONTINUED

Preparing the dog to be adoptable and desirable is always the number one objective but quick and safe assimilation into my pack routine is a close second. To this date I have never had a fight or growl or bite that was not my fault. Today I can claim to have a process that works 100% of the time, assuming I do not walk into the shelter and pick the most challenging stressed dog to bring home. I also owe success to my existing pack which is generally social and friendly to other dogs. Properly orchestrated introductions with patience must be done in order to ensure that neither the new dog nor the existing pack is at risk or that the rescue dog is damaged further.



Foster Tank on left, home dog in middle, Foster Blanch on the right. Fully integrated dogs make it much easier to manage while I wait for homes. Blanch took about 7 months to find the best home. What I thought might never happen turned out to be one of my most rewarding experiences.

Currently I work with a very good Rescue Group and I trust they will not ask me to take a dog unless they know that I have the ability and experience and can provide a particular dog the correct environment. It is

so important that I do not take on a problem that will be more than I can handle emotionally, physically or financially. That is what causes volunteers to quit. It can be the same with dogs; it has to be a good experience for me, the rescue dog and my own dogs! Here is the process I go thru to bring a strange dog into my home.

Before I agree to take the dog home:

- I ask questions about health, vaccinations and find out if the dog altered. This is important to know for the health of my pack and to also know what my responsibility and potential financial obligation will be even if I will be reimbursed.
- I verify that the dog has a sponsor that I can work well with.
- I ask about the dogs potential behavior issues. Has the dog had an evaluation and can I have a copy?
 - Has he been in a crate and how did he do?
- I try to get a copy of the shelter intake and health documents.



Home dog on left and Foster Lexi on the right. Lexi had fear and dog reactivity when she came to us from the shelter at about 6 months. She took a year and two fosters to get over her fear and be placed. She was fully integrated into my pack. I cried when she left.

I get my home ready for the foster dog:

- I have an extra crate, ex-pen and clean bedding ready for the dog.
- I set up the crate in a low traffic area of the house where the dog can participate in sights and sounds without being overwhelmed.
- I put the ex-pen around the crate so my dogs cannot get up close and personal (yet).
- I also make sure I have nyla-bones and or safe rawhide chews that are size appropriate. If it is a puppy I have puppy appropriate toys.
- I have lots of high value treats around.
- I have a proper sized collar and leash dedicated to the new dog.
- I ask for some of his current food to transition him slowly to my diet.

When I bring the dog home:

- I do not allow any access to my existing dogs no matter how stellar everyone is. I never underestimate the amount of stress a dog coming from a bad situation or into a new situation will be under or how my existing pack will feel about the intruder.
- For the first few days to a week the new dog is not allowed anywhere except on a leash, in a crate or in a small yard without distractions. This is bonding time for me and the dog mixed with teaching focus and simple commands.
- We do lots of sits and focus and follow me exercises with appropriate value treats. A super stressed or fearful dog will need cheese and more relaxed dog may be happy with kibble. Some stressed dogs will need time before they are willing to take a treat.
- My dogs are monitored to make sure the new dog is comfortable with their presence.



Foster Pippa on the left and home dog on the right. Ex-pen removed home dog and foster dog can interact safely after having got to know each other with ex-pen barrier. This was a big day for Pippa.

- I would guess in a few days there should not be a problem with my dogs coming and going and greeting the new dog with the barrier of the ex-pen but not up to the crate yet. I have had dogs be reactive even with the ex-pen barrier and have had to move my dogs away yet still keep the foster in the living area.
- I always give lots of treats to the foster dog while crated to reward focused relaxed behavior and/or to teach that good things happen when my dogs are milling around.
- I reward my dogs for nice sit stays and good happy behavior while being near the foster dog. By doing this I am setting up all the dogs to get to know each other in a rewarding environment.



Home dog on left and stressed Foster on right.

Dogs cannot touch each other. Very respectful home dog giving non threatening posture in her crate.

Foster dog has access to come and go and explore

As I see the Foster dog relaxing and my as dogs are getting over the novelty of the new member of the house:

- I remove the ex pen.
- I still do not let my entire pack swarm the Foster dog. The odds are high they won't as the foster dog is becoming family by now.
- One of my dogs is very social and she will end up sleeping and hanging out with the foster as if they are now best friends.
- If I have not already done so, I move the crate into my bedroom. I might even have one crate in the living area also so the dog is always with people when in the house.
- The dog should have good command of sit and focus and be relaxed around my dogs that also have a good sit and focus. Depending on how things are going, this has been about one week possible longer for more stressed dogs.

- I can now start to introduce my most socially respectful dog off leash while I walk on leash with the foster. We take a walk in the largest safe area possible giving lots of praise and treats. It is best to have a 2nd person and both dogs be on leash but I take longer on the above steps ensuring I will be safe at this step.

- I carefully watch for signs of reactivity, stress and discomfort and back track if necessary. If at this point things are still stressful I probably have rushed thru the previous steps.

- I continue with on leash work until we are super comfortable with all dogs. Then I carefully allow Foster off leash and my best dog on leash. Probably another 3-7 days, depending on the dogs reactions and comfort levels. If you only have one other dog this can happen relatively quickly.

I always keep in mind my ultimate goal is to safely assimilate this new dog as a member of my family. I never have more dog power than I can easily handle with the number of human hands available. I do not move forward until I am confident all the signs show relaxed social behaviors among all dogs, key word

being “social”. If I have the slightest doubt I give it another day. Keep in mind that dogs have different play styles so the foster may never run safely with my dogs. Puppies with improper socialization or those that were removed too early from their mother may not interact well with others. It is also important to keep my own dogs from being stressed by the foster too. I am always cognizant dominance behavior and resource guarding and act appropriately. These behaviors are different than the reactive behaviors of dogs in fear or under stress. By following these steps I am de-stressing the foster dog and setting him and my existing pack up for success. I am also training the rescue dog which makes him more adoptable, and I am learning a lot about dog behaviors by being extremely observant. My dogs depend on and trust me to keep them safe. These steps up front will make the next weeks and the adoption process go much more smoothly. These steps may seem like a lot of work but in reality once completed you have a dog that is assimilated into a routine that is actually very easy and makes the dog really adoptable.

There are exceptions to every rule and there are dogs that may go faster and some that go slower. I may have a dog in my pack that will never tolerate the foster. There are also foster dogs that may never become 100% assimilated. Never underestimate the amount of stress on all dogs in new situations. By taking my time with a lot of reward based conditioning it can be a good experience for all involved.

My Rules:

- Make decisions with your head not your heart.
- Care for the foster dog with your heart.
- Never underestimate the amount of stress a dog may be under or the time it may take to de-stress the dog. Some dogs may assimilate quickly but signs of stress can linger for months and longer.
- Do not have more dogs together than you can easily manage.
- Take an active interest and pride in making the rescue dog into the best dog you possibly can.
- Take lots of photos and short video clips.
- Watch for signs of stress and anxiety which will tell you how fast to move thru the steps. i.e. lip licking, yawning, avoiding eye contact etc. These signs are different than dominant behaviors.
- Do not allow the dog long periods of time outside off lead without continuous observation from a distance.
- Work on sit, focus and follow me without other dogs around often so that you are bonding with and training the rescue dog.
- Always err on the side of caution.
- There is no substitute for time and patience so don't rush!
- Never sacrifice the safety of any dog or human.
- Never allow an alarming behavior to continue, i.e. fence fighting, barking for long periods, rude behavior toward your existing dogs, etc.



Special thanks to Freya who in her short life has raised more rescue pups and helped more grown dogs learn to relax and love life than most dogs in their entire life.

I could not ask for a more respectful, gentle, and loving partner to help me with foster dog rehabilitation.

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In closing there are many ways to rescue and foster an animal. Whether you foster for one day or 3 months, this is a process that will work and keep everyone safe and happy and sane. I am just a regular person with a full time job and a motley crew of canines and I do this all the time. Sometimes the adoption happens before I am finished with this process and sometimes the rescue dog is a beloved member of my pack and just like one of my own when it leaves. Every dog is different but the way I move forward with the above steps is the same for every dog. It sets up the Rescue dog for a low stress welcome to my home and for a good start at the new home.

If we care enough to rescue, care enough to do the BEST you can.

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