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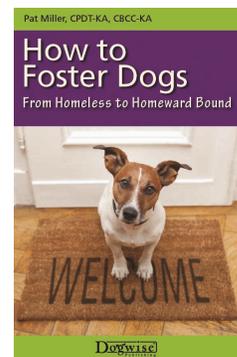
How to Foster Dogs – From Homeless to Homeward Bound

Ch. 3—Bringing Your Foster Home

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Be prepared

You've already made the necessary advance preparations. Now the day you've been waiting for has finally arrived. Excitement is high—your foster dog is coming home! What can you do to make this transition as easy as possible for everyone concerned?

First, double check that you have all your equipment on hand—crates, tethers, exercise pens and baby gates, and that you have a supply of the food your foster has been eating. A sudden food-switch can trigger a nasty bout of gastrointestinal upset and resulting diarrhea—not something you need to be dealing with along with all the other chaos that can accompany the arrival of a new dog in your household. Stock your freezer with enough stuffed Kongs and/or other food toys to keep your foster busy for several days. (You'll want to be sure to replace them as they are emptied, so you don't run out.)

Successful introductions

If your foster has a clean bill of health and you don't need to quarantine, one of your first orders of business may be to introduce him to your own dogs. In preparation for that, make sure your dogs are well exercised and on the tired side. Whether someone brings your foster to you, or you go pick him up yourself, give him a chance to stretch his legs, go to the bathroom and recover from the stress of the trip before you try dog-dog introductions.

There are a number of factors to keep in mind that can increase the likelihood of a positive outcome when introducing your foster dog into your home. A peaceful first introduction sets the stage for fostering success. The more heavily you can weigh the odds in your favor for that first encounter, the greater your chance for peace in the pack. The factors to keep in mind include:

- Timing
- Location
- Number of skilled handlers
- Knowing and understanding—to the greatest extent possible—the personalities and histories of all the dogs involved
- Introduction process

Timing. It's best to introduce your foster dog to your home when things are otherwise calm and reasonably stress-free. You want to allow ample time for a leisurely introduction process and a low-key adjustment period with adequate supervision. In addition, you need to be able to iron out any wrinkles that may appear. This may mean taking time off work, in case the dogs don't hit it off instantly. Holidays are generally *not* the ideal time for introductions unless, for you, "home for the holidays," means lots of quiet time spent alone with your fur-family.

Of course, you can't always control the timing. A shelter or rescue dog may be facing a ticking clock that dictates a speedy transition to foster. Just do the best you can to arrange for your foster to arrive at a time that optimizes your success potential. If he has to come at an inopportune time, arrange to keep him in a room or building isolated from your own dogs until proper introductions can be made.

Location, location, location. It's best to introduce dogs in neutral territory—ideally outdoors, in a large, open, safely fenced space. The more trapped a dog feels, the more his stress will push him toward defensive aggression. Plus, when you do introductions in one dog's territory, it gives that dog the home-field advantage, and you risk displays of territorial aggression.

Optimum options include a fenced yard other than your own, an off-leash dog park at low-use time (that is, with *no* other dogs present), a tennis court (caution—many tennis courts understandably prohibit dogs), or a large, open, uncluttered indoor area such as someone's unfinished basement. If none of those are available to you, your own fenced yard may be your best choice.

Number of skilled handlers. Ideally, you'll want at least one handler per dog. One *skilled* handler, that is—a person who is comfortable handling dogs, and who you trust to follow your instructions or, alternatively, a qualified positive behavior professional who can coach *you* on the process. Someone who panics and intervenes unnecessarily, or who thinks they know it all and that rough "dominance" handling is the right approach, can botch the whole job by adding stress to dogs who are still sorting out relationships. If you don't have access to

skilled handlers, at least find handlers who are good at following instructions and don't succumb easily to hysterical behavior. If you can't find those, you're better off with fewer handlers, although you should have at least one other person present, if for no other reason than to call 911 if the situation gets out of hand.

Knowing and understanding the personalities and histories of the dogs. You may not know much about your incoming foster, especially if he was a stray, or seized in a neglect or cruelty case. When dogs are surrendered by their owners, a good organization takes a through history in order to facilitate interim care and appropriate rehoming. You should, however, have a pretty good sense of your own dogs' canine social skills. Do they play well with others at the dog park? During playtime at good manners class? With their own packmates? How do they act with doggie visitors to their home? During chance encounters with other canines on the streets?

If you have reason to believe that your dogs are anything less than gregarious with **conspecifics** (others of their own species) due to a history of aggressive behavior with other dogs, or if you just aren't confident about refereeing the introductions yourself, you might do well to rethink your fostering project, or at least engage the services of a qualified behavior professional. She will be able to help you read and understand your dogs' body language, and optimize the potential for success.

Hopefully, you've already given great consideration to good personality matches when you selected your foster dog. If you have a dog in your pack who likes to assert himself, you're wise to choose a new dog who's happy to maintain a lower profile in the hierarchy. If your current dog is a shrinking violet, she'll be happiest with a new companion who doesn't bully her mercilessly. If you have one of those canine gems who gets along with everyone, then you have more fostering options. If you want your own dog to be able to be "top dog," then look for soft, appeasing-type fosters. If you don't care where your easygoing dog ends up in the hierarchy, then you have the entire canine personality continuum to choose from.

The introduction process

You are safest introducing your new foster to your easier dogs first, one at a time. Assuming all goes well with the one-on-ones, then try a threesome, adding additional dogs as behavior allows.

The process I've found most successful is to start with dogs on leashes on opposite sides of the enclosed space. Try to keep leashes loose, if possible. Watch the dogs'

behavior. They should seem interested in each other, alert without excessive arousal. Ideally you'll see tails wagging at half-mast, soft, wriggling body postures, play bows, ears back, squinty eyes, no direct eye contact. These are clear expressions of non-aggressive social invitation.

Warning signs include stiffness in the body, standing tall, ears pricked hard forward, growling, hard direct eye contact, stiffly-raised fast wagging tails, perhaps even lunging on the leash and aggressive barking.

If you see reassuring social behavior, proceed with the approach until the dogs are about ten feet apart. If they continue to show unambiguous signs of friendliness, drop the leashes and let them meet. I prefer not to let dogs meet and greet with handlers holding the leashes. Leashes tend to interfere with the dogs' ability to greet normally, and can actually induce dogs to give false body language signals, resulting in aggression. For example, a tight leash can stiffen and raise a dog's front end, causing him to look more tense and offensive than he means to be, which in turn can cause the other dog to react offensively. A defensive dog who wants to retreat may feel trapped because of the leash, and act aggressively because he can't move away.

Leave leashes on the dogs initially, dragging freely on the ground, so you can grab them and separate dogs easily if necessary. Monitor the greeting. You are likely to see some normal jockeying for position and some tension, as they sniff and circle, and then erupt into play. As soon as you can tell that they're getting along, remove leashes and let them play unencumbered. Watch that the play doesn't escalate into excessive arousal (which can lead to aggression), but remember that it's normal and acceptable for dogs to growl and bite each other in play. As long as both dogs are enjoying the action, it's a good thing.

If, however, you see warning signs as you approach with the dogs on leash, you'll need to go more slowly. Most commonly you'll see behavior somewhere on the continuum between completely relaxed and friendly and outright aggression. You'll need to make a judgment call about whether the intensity of the behavior is such that you need to stop and seek professional assistance, or low enough that you can proceed with caution.

Pat Miller is a Certified Dog Behavior Consultant, dog trainer and author of six books on dog training and behavior including *Play With Your Dog*, and *Do-Over Dogs*. She offers training and behavior services, conducts academies for trainers at her Peaceable Paws training facility in Fairplay, Maryland, and presents seminars worldwide.