

## **Article: Fostering an Animal**

by Diane Novak

### **What does it mean to foster an animal?**

A foster home can be best described as the safe haven between being "rescued" and finding a forever home. Foster "parents" are extremely special. They are responsible for feeding, loving and tending to the needs of animals who are not technically theirs, but must be treated as one of the family. Usually foster homes provide food and litter (for cats) and the rescue organization or shelter pays for all medical needs. Some organizations have the funds to also pay for food if the foster home is not financially able to. It is interesting to note that any food, litter and (mileage) to the vet are tax deductible "donations" so keeping all receipts and even a mileage book is a good idea.

I first heard about fostering animals in 1992 when reading an article in the New York City Post how Manhattan's ASPCA on 96th street created a solution to caring for their special needs animals. Whenever the ASPCA was presented with orphaned kittens that needed bottle feeding every two hours, or a dog who was severely depressed, they turned to an elite group of volunteers who took these "special" animals into their homes. The ASPCA dubbed this rare breed of volunteers "foster homes".

### **What does it take to be a foster home?**

Not much really: An extra room in a house or apartment (can even be a roomy laundry room) and the willingness to make a huge difference for a cat or dog on a temporary basis. Animals do not need to be isolated from your personal pets unless that is something you choose. Actually the more socialization with other pets, family members and different aged children, the more rounded (and more adoptable) that animal will become. Of course each animal is different and should be matched specifically to your family. Some animals need to be the only dog or cat in the house while others need to bond with another animal. The job of the rescue or shelter is to find the best temporary setting available at the time. Hopefully this would include "temperament testing" the animal before it goes to the foster situation.

Being in a shelter setting is clearly unlike a home setting, so an animal now placed in a home may behave differently. For instance, some dogs may have only lived their entire lives on a chain or penned outside. These animals may not have been given the opportunity to be exercised or even leash walked. Others may have never been housebroken. The foster home is their opportunity to learn the traits that would help them become more adoptable.

Any organization placing an animal in foster care has an obligation not only to the animal but to the foster home to create a suitable "fit". If the temporary placement isn't working, (for whatever reason) the animal needs to be placed elsewhere.

There are exceptions to every rule. Several years ago we took in a shelter dog as a temporary foster. The shelter had very little information on him except that he was surrendered by an elderly man who had 'too many dogs'. We were unaware (as was the shelter) that Toby had "separation anxiety". In a few weeks he was ate through three remote controls (to the tune of \$30 a pop!), munched his way through my wall to wall carpet and ate the rear end of my young son's favorite stuffed toy.

Now here was a perfect example of a quiet "foster" dog that showed no signs of "unusual or displeasing" behavior in the first several weeks of fostering. In his case, the ironic twist occurred when he became bonded with us. His anxiety heightened whenever we left the house. Unaware of his background, we could only imagine what fear he was experiencing. He was taken to obedience classes, crated (PS: never place a crate too close to a couch-yeah he ate that too!) and eventually became the loving, confident dog he was meant to be.

No two fosters are alike, and because each animal has his or her own distinct personality and history, each will react differently in a home. Some animals bond very quickly to their foster "parents" while others take longer, or remain guarded depending on their history. There are very few hard and fast rules when fostering. Fostering is a work in progress.

### **What if I fall in love with the animal I am fostering?**

You may. And if you do, there is always the choice of adopting the animal. We affectionately call these situations "failed" fosters because it is common for a foster home to shy away from ever fostering again once they adopt.

When you foster an animal be prepared to invite strangers into your home to meet your foster animal. The shelter or rescue will contact you when interest in the animal is expressed. You could be asked to speak to the potential adopter first. But rest assured every opportunity to comfortably coordinate with your schedule will be made. If you are fostering for a shelter, the meeting may take place at the facility itself instead of your home.

### **Screening:**

A potential adopter may have seen the animal on the website or in an ad under your organization's name. Each organization operates differently. One may do the screening of potential homes for you; another may ask you to screen. Oftentimes it will be up to the foster home to evaluate after an initial phone conversation whether further screening is needed. One must never leave out important "tidbits" about the animal that would *not* show him/her in the best light. In other words it is best to be honest with any potential adopters since we want to make quality connections and not

encourage "returns". Omitting information that does not show the animal in its' best light will ultimately be a disservice to the animal.

If after accurately describing the animal to the potential adopter and exchanging information about the home, you will get a "feel" if this would make a good "match".

On the day the potential adopter(s) come to meet the animal, it is a good idea for the foster "parent" to make the initial introduction. Most of the time the organization sponsoring your foster animal will lean heavily on your instincts regarding a impending adoption. You are in the unique position to observe interactions between animal and adopter, and would be a reliable source regarding the success of any potential match.

Sometimes the shelter or organization will share information on adoption applications prior to meeting the animal. Other times people will be filling out applications at your home. Although each organization handles reference checking differently, rest assured that this is an important part of the application process.

**The Bottom Line:** When you foster an animal, you open your heart, not protect it! You are the animal's caretaker and are always asking yourself: "What would be the best placement for this animal?". If the animal has special-needs sometimes the best solution is to remain a foster animal for the remainder of its life. As a rule, first time foster homes are eased into the process with animals who are easy to place.

### **I have kids. Won't they be upset when the animal leaves for its' forever home?**

That depends. In my home we've fostered ever since my son was an infant. He understands what we do and why it's necessary to do it. He has tried to convince me to trade some of our permanent brood for a foster kitten or cat through the years, but once he realized that was a non-negotiable issue, he gave up trying. He's seen them come and go. He's cried when some have left and has visited others. Did it destroy him? No. Did it make him a better person to have this experience? Most definitely! He comprehends the meaning of volunteerism and helping others in need. Through it all, my belief is that fostering animals is a character builder. A definite WIN-WIN for the whole family.