

Proper Introductions Between Dogs

Bringing home a new foster dog can be both rewarding and challenging. For many it is a time filled with excitement and joy knowing we just saved a life and now will help them on to their new forever home! With the best of intentions, we set forth to integrate this new furry member into our existing lifestyles, family and other household pets as soon as possible.

Unfortunately, all too often good intentions go bad and foster families find themselves overwhelmed, uncertain and confused. To best understand “where things went wrong” we need to first understand the gravity of what your new foster dog has gone through and the impact those experiences have on their overall temperament and response to stressful situations.

Understanding Stress Impact on A Dog's Temperament

Stress is a biological response that occurs when an animal perceives a threat to their well-being and occurs at the chemical level of the brain. A dog with a prolonged high stress level will suffer from many ailments both physically and emotionally. They will be faster and more violent in their defense. They will probably have an activated defense mechanism at a much earlier point than others ¹

Dr. Pamela Reid sums up stress for a shelter dog this way, “Dogs in a shelter are exposed to a variety of stressful events: the place is novel and often extremely noisy; the feeding and walking routine is likely to be quite different from what the dog is accustomed to; the dog has no control over what happens to him; and moreover the dog is probably experiencing distress over being separated from those with whom he was attached.”

I think everyone can agree that being in a shelter is extremely stressful on the dogs who land there. What seems to be missed is the recognition that the stress they experience will have any adverse reaction on the dog's natural coping skills. A group of researchers in Ohio, headed by David Tubor and Michael Hennessy, determined that dogs coming into a shelter normally experience high levels of stress for the first three days.

As time passes the dog's stress level may lower but it never completely goes away making it difficult to accurately assess how that dog will react when more stress is added; for example, riding to the new foster home, meeting yet more strangers, arriving at an unfamiliar home and being exposed to unfamiliar dogs. It's safe to assume a dog experiencing the added stressors will cause him/her to drop back into those high levels of stress experienced when arriving at the shelter.

Effective Introductions - Setting Up for Success

Having a better understanding of what your new foster dog is likely experiencing internally it's important to come up with a plan that will allow them to successfully and seamlessly transition into their new environment. Let's dig in!

Integrations into the Foster Home and Resident Dogs

One of the biggest mistakes foster homes make is introducing the new foster dog to the resident canines within the first 24hrs. A dog fresh out of the shelter (or transporting between foster homes to get to you) is in a

heightened state of stress and as a result their coping skills are negatively impacted. This could display as aggressive behaviors, anxiety, overly timid/fearful mannerisms or hyperactivity.

Regardless of how your foster dog manifests it's behavioral response to stress your resident dogs are picking up on the increased hormone release and witnessing the behavioral response. As a result, your resident dogs begin to pick up on this heightened state and their stress level increases. This is one of the top reasons previously gentle pets suddenly start a fight with the new kid on the block!

The good news is introductions don't have to be traumatic experiences that capitalize on existing stressors. Rather by following these guidelines for introductions you increase your chances for a successful and seamless integration:

1. Before your foster arrives go over the rules with all family members in the house so everyone is doing the same thing. Designate a "safe spot" where your foster will spend the first 3-5 days during his de-stressing time. Ideally this "safe spot" will be located near the family activity but not in the middle of it. Equally resident canines should have no access to this area during this time. I personally follow a zero visual for the first 3 days but the dogs are able to hear and smell each other. They potty in the same locations at separate times giving them the opportunity to get familiar with the other dog's scent. During these 3 days the foster dog is comfortable in his "safe spot" with a comfy bed, engaging chew toys and scheduled exercise breaks. All play and affection are given during meal times, potty breaks and walks. The rest of the day is quiet time to adjust to the new sights, sounds and smells of this house.
2. At the end of these 3 days you will be able to more accurately assess your foster dog's energy level, temperament and comfort level around novel stimuli. This is the time to start allowing visual introductions but not yet up close and personal. I recommend day 4 be all about walking parallel when they first meet (you can have distance between the dogs if needed). Both dogs should be on leash and a separate handler per dog so you can avoid them making contact. The ideal parallel walk is one where they see each other but are not engaging with one another. This should be done before any other visual opportunities. After the walk is complete it's ideal to have them in a neutral location off leash but separated by a gate or fence. Allow them to sniff and interact with minimal involvement by you unless tensions start to increase and you need to redirect one or both dogs away. Again, you should have a helper with you for this. If you have multiple dogs do not have them all meet at once. Instead block off times to let each dog meet one-on-one through the gate separately.
3. If there were no signs of stress on day 4 then you are ready to let them meet face to face on day 5 - ON LEASH - having a separate handler for each dog. Again, if you have multiple dogs do these introductions one-on-one. Assess stress level as you let the dogs investigate each other. Do your best not to let the leashes tangle and avoid pulling on the leash unless you need to back your dog up. If things are going well you can drop the leashes and let them move more freely leaving the leashes attached at the collar. Once you are finished separate the dogs and reward them individually with a yummy chew. I like to consistently reward in this manner after I separate the dogs over the next few weeks as it not only makes the dogs more willing to be split up but it also puts on cue my request to end playtime!
4. Over the next 2 weeks it is important that when your foster dog is spending time with your resident dogs they are supervised and play time is kept short. In between play make sure they have down time separate from each other to de-stress. At this stage it is completely ok to let them rest in the same room during calm times unless there are other reasons to separate them. During these 2 weeks the dogs will be getting to know each other's personalities and establishing their roles in the pack. Even when everything is going smooth things can quickly turn sour if tensions escalate - especially during meal times (including human mealtimes) play or when toys are present and during human interactions with the dogs. For this reason, it's important to still insist on down time apart from each other from time to time.

5. As you move into week 3 your foster dog and resident dogs should be acquainted and feel established with each other. The time they spend together will be more like your normal routine with occasional “time outs” as needed if you feel there appears to be stress building between the dogs.

Meeting Potential Adopters

Now that your foster dog has de-stressed and integrated into the family it's time to start interviewing potential adopters. This is another area many fosters find themselves facing challenges where their sweet and well-mannered foster suddenly displays signs of aggression or fear.

A dog's home is his safe zone. It is predictable and consistent. He knows who his family is including extended family such as regular visitors or delivery people that frequent his neighborhood. Invite in a friend and he happily greets them, invite a stranger and you might be surprised at his reaction.

Strangers entering the home are unpredictable, inconsistent and therefore not necessarily safe to your foster dog. How your foster dog reacts will greatly depend on his background in having strangers frequent his home. Since shelter dogs rarely (if ever) come with a background history we need to err on the safe side and assume they have minimal exposure to strangers entering the home.

When meeting potential adopters select a location that is familiar to your foster but is not viewed as “his” such as a park near-by that you can visit at varying times to keep it less novel. You can contact local pet stores to see if they will allow you to meet adopters in their store. This is a great option for dogs that enjoy trips to the pet store but a bad option for dogs that get nervous in busy settings so use your best judgement.

Another option is to meet at a neighboring street near your home and go for a walk with your dog and adopter. You can set this up so the walk circles back to your house and the adopters come in with the dog - they are not strangers anymore! This allows time for you and the adopters to talk about the dog's needs while you walk, they see his leash manners and public behavior and upon returning home they can engage him in some working roles like practicing commands if he knows any, tossing a ball or just getting affection.

If they have another dog that needs to meet your foster as well, a quiet park setting or walking on a resident street are ideal as they minimize environmental stresses that could trigger tensions and allow the dogs to initially get acquainted in a neutral working mode.

Upon returning home, allow the dogs to interact outside in a location that is not as regularly frequented by your foster (i.e., if his potty location is in the back yard let them interact in the front yard). There is no rush to take the two dogs inside. Rather, allow them some neutral play time before taking the new dog into the foster dog's space. This helps reduce your foster dog's innate tendency to guard and protect his things.

Summing It All Up

I know this seems like a lot and it is. But 2 weeks of a little extra effort will pay off tenfold as you watch your new foster go from stressed out shelter dog to calm, confident family member. By understanding and acknowledging your dog's emotional needs you are empowering him to make good choices when interacting with other dogs and people alike. You are giving him the opportunity to succeed in a world that was turned completely upside down just days before he met you. You are choosing to help him shine his brightest and it doesn't get much better than that!