

Adult Cat Foster Carer Manual

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Table of Contents

1. INTRODUCTION.....	3
2. GUIDELINES AND PROCEDURES	4
How to become a registered foster carer	4
RSPCA ACT Foster Carers Network on Facebook	4
Important questions to ask yourself.....	4
3. FOSTERING REQUIREMENTS.....	6
4. TIME AND COMMITMENT	7
5. PREPARING TO FOSTER	8
Preparing Your Own Pets	8
Preparing Space for Foster Cats	8
What We Will Provide	9
6. FOSTERING.....	10
Introducing a Foster Animal into your home	10
7. RETURNING FOSTER CATS	12
8. HEALTH & HYGIENE.....	13
Incoming Health Assessments	13
Common Signs of Disease	13
Non-specific signs of illness include.....	13
Signs of cat flu include.....	13
Signs of gastro-intestinal problems (including parasitic disease)	14
Worms (roundworms & tapeworms)	14
Vomiting.....	14
Fleas, lice, & ear mites	14
Ringworm	14
Toxoplasmosis	15
Cleaning and Disinfection.....	15
Personal Hygiene.....	15
9. COMMON BEHAVIOURAL PROBLEMS	16
Inappropriate Toileting	16
Petting Aggression	16
10. ADDITIONAL INFORMATION.....	17
EAP - Employee Assistance Program	17
Important contact information	17
Shelter.....	17
Emergency vet	17

1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of foster care for adult cats is to provide alternative care for cats who are not coping well in the shelter environment, have behavioural or medical issues, are long term residents not currently available for adoption, or to relieve the shelter of animals for disease control and space control reasons.

The fostering of animals is an important and rewarding part of work that RSPCA ACT volunteers and staff undertake and gives those animals a wonderful start to life before moving to suitable, lifelong homes.

This manual will assist potential foster carers to decide if they can commit to becoming a foster carer and if they can abide by the conditions and requirements outlined in this manual.

2. GUIDELINES AND PROCEDURES

How to become a registered foster carer

The first step in becoming a foster carer with the RSPCA ACT is to read this manual carefully. You must also read, complete, sign and return the foster carer application form. All foster carers must be a holder of a current ACT WWVP (Working With Vulnerable People) card, this is available at no charge for volunteers via Access Canberra.

Before applications are approved, carers must attend an information session with the Animal Care Manager and/or the Volunteer Coordinator. The information session is to discuss in detail the requirements for fostering as well as answer any questions you may have in relation to becoming a foster carer.

Only approved foster carers (registered RSPCA volunteers and staff) are permitted to foster animals. This means that if you are to go away for a weekend you are not able to leave your fosters in the care of other, non-approved members of your household. Your household members may however choose to register as a foster carer alongside you. The fostered animals remain the property of RSPCA ACT and the fostering program is conducted under the direction of the Animal Care Manager, Cattery and the Volunteer Coordinator.

All fostering from the RSPCAACT must be approved by the Animal Care Manager, Cattery or the Volunteer Coordinator. It is the role of the Cattery Team to organise, monitor and record the fostering of animals in accordance with these guidelines and procedures, to ensure that a high standard of safety is maintained for both carers and animals and that all carers are provided with adequate support and information

Foster cats remain the property of RSPCA ACT at all times. The RSPCA ACT reserves the right to refuse permission to foster and to remove cats from foster care at any time should it be necessary to do so.

RSPCA ACT Foster Carers Network on Facebook

A Facebook page has been set up for foster carers to share photos and good news stories regarding their foster animals. To be a part of this group you must agree to abide by RSPCA ACT's Social Media Policy and Code of Conduct and be a current, registered foster carer. Please be aware that this page is not for you to get medical advice - this must only be given by the RSPCA Veterinary Clinic. RSPCA ACT staff do monitor the forum but as we are not on this site 24/7 do not expect urgent responses from staff or rely upon Facebook as a means of communicating with staff. RSPCA staff may delete posts that are not relevant to the care of your foster cats or are in breach of RSPCA policy.

Important questions to ask yourself

- Are you able to get to us quickly in an emergency? This means you must have transport readily available
- Will you be able to spend quality time with the animals, on average, it is best to spend at least 2 hours a day with your foster animals
- Will you be able to commit to appointments ranging from once a week to every three weeks whether or not they are ill?

- Are you aware that there is a great deal of clean-up and even possible damage to your home when you take a foster home? Foster animals can damage curtains, furniture, carpets and clothing. RSPCA will not be held responsible for any damage incurred while fostering an animal
- Are you willing to work with our veterinary care system? Please understand that only our vets can treat foster animals free of charge
- Can you commit to spending the entire foster period with the animal? If something unexpected happens, you will need to email foster@rspcaact.org.au or call 02 6287 8100 to inform us of an early foster return
- Do you feel comfortable explaining to friends and family that these animals are not yours to adopt out and that they must go through the regular adoption process at RSPCA ACT?
- Will you be able to bring the animal back at the end of the foster period? It can be difficult to let go once you have become emotionally attached

3. FOSTERING REQUIREMENTS

We look for a safe, secure home environment with lots of love, attention and socialisation so that our cats return happy, healthy, and ready to go to a new home. Carers need to be aware that socialising is as important as keeping animals physically healthy.

Foster carers don't need to be home all day to look after their four-legged charges. However, they do need to provide love and companionship for at least a few hours a day so that the cat returns to us well-socialised, and have the best chance of finding a forever home.

We recommend that cats first be contained in smaller spaces before gradually being given access to more spaces as they become more confident. In some cases, we might suggest that your foster cat be housed only in tiled/timber/vinyl floored areas to help with disinfecting and disease control. Some carers allow their charges full run of the house and this certainly helps with their socialising - remember though those carpeted areas are difficult to disinfect. Additionally full run of the house may be a little daunting for a timid or fearful cat.

However, not everyone is able to provide this - some resident pets will not tolerate visitors in their territory and others may stress too much. If you do have your own animals and prefer them not to interact with your foster animals; yes, you can still foster - as long as you are able to provide a separate, safe, restricted and enriching environment.

For foster families with children, we encourage sensible child involvement, but parents must assume responsibility. It is recommended that children approach these animals quietly and slowly. If the animal is scared or seeks somewhere to hide, please restrict interaction until the cat gains more confidence. Make sure that you explain to your children that the cat is timid and needs to build up confidence.

By fostering an adult cat, you can make a huge difference in the life of that animal. Fostering is one of the most rewarding experiences you can have as an animal lover. It offers the best of both worlds to you - the love, affection, and gratitude of an animal without the lifetime of emotional and financial commitments.

4. TIME AND COMMITMENT

Many of the animals that require fostering have already been through stressful changes, so the carer may be faced with a period of adjustment where the animal, particularly older ones may be unresponsive or afraid. This is usually overcome with time and patience. People who work full-time can foster animals, providing they are willing to spend quality time socialising their charges. Be aware that cleaning can also be considerable!

It is important for our cats to spend time interacting with people and experiencing the general sounds, smells and events of a household. Many adult cats who are in foster will take a lot of time, patience and encouragement to interact with you. This is completely fine and for these cats, socialisation can include something as simple as you sitting in a room with them without interacting directly - read a book, do some work, just carry on as normal. Acknowledge the cat if it does come over for a sniff or pat.

It is in the animal's best interest to stay with the same foster carer until they are permanently rehomed; transferring between foster homes is not ideal, so we appreciate that you carefully consider that you have the necessary time before committing to foster caring.

In some cases, due to unforeseen circumstances, it may be necessary for you to return an animal to the shelter. If this is to occur please notify as soon as possible via foster@rspca-act.org.au so a replacement carer can be found. If you know you will be unavailable at any time (eg-

5. PREPARING TO FOSTER

Preparing Your Own Pets

If you have pets in your home, review their veterinary records and update any vaccinations that may have lapsed (proof will be required). Your pets will also need to be desexed, up to date with worming and flea free.

If your own pet is under current veterinary treatment then you may not be allowed to participate in the foster program, depending on the circumstances.

Preparing Space for Foster Cats

Foster cats are to be kept indoors at all times. They are not allowed to go free-roaming outside. Access to a very secure, escape-proof cat run may be considered as an exception to this. Any outdoor enclosures that foster cats can access must be escape-proof, sufficiently warm and provide adequate shelter from the elements. It should also be of sufficient size for cats to move freely about. The cat should always have access to bedding, litter and fresh water so if the cat run is freestanding it will need to include these also.

When keeping cats indoors they should be confined to one room of the house until they become familiar with it. Their litter tray and water bowls should also be kept in this room. When they start to venture into the house, they will have a familiar “safe” room to return to should they become frightened or stressed. All windows in the rooms that the cats have access to should be kept secure. It is important that you do not follow cats into this space or attempt to remove them from hidey holes (unless they are unsafe) when they are frightened; they need to know that they have a safe space to retreat to if needed. You may find in time that they will ask you to come with them - especially at feeding time!

The flooring should be made of a material which is easy to clean and disinfect, such as hard wood, ceramic tiles, linoleum, or smooth concrete.

The room needs to be “cat friendly”

- Everything in the room should be easy to wash and disinfect or be replaceable
- Remove anything heavy or delicate on shelves
- Remove any chemicals or cleaning agents
- If using the bathroom ensure the toilet seat is closed
- If using the laundry, ensure that the cupboards, washing machine lid and clothes drier are kept closed and that disinfectants and detergents are not able to be accessed by the cat
- It should contain everything the cat will need to eat, drink, eliminate, sleep and play. These items should not be shared with resident cats
- Have at least one bowl for water, one for wet food, and one for dry food
- Put the litter trays as far away as possible from food, water and bedding. Scoop the litter tray regularly to encourage the cat to feel comfortable in his space.
- A secure hiding area, such as a cat carrier with the door removed or a box on its side, or a hidey bed will help the cat feel safe—this is especially important for timid cats
- Provide safe, disposable or easily sanitised toys to entertain the cat when you are not with them, such as ping pong balls.

What We Will Provide

Foster parents receive approved food from RSPCA ACT to feed to their charges as well as worming treatment and any medication they may need.

For each new cat, you will also receive bedding, toys, litter and litter trays, and tips for caring for your individual foster animals.

You can also contact RSPCA ACT for advice via email or call.

Please note the RSPCA ACT does not cover the cost of carpet cleaning if foster parents decide to give their cats access to carpeted areas.

For animals in foster, the shelter Veterinary Clinic is available 9.00am - 5.00pm Monday to Friday as well as periodical support on Saturdays. Should there be any health issues which occur during the foster period please email foster@rspca-act.org.au or call for an appointment.

6. FOSTERING

When we have a cat available for foster care, the cattery staff will contact appropriate foster carers to see who is available to take the cat. Usually fostering of only one cat at a time is permitted, unless in the case of a bonded pair. Cats need to be placed in foster homes as soon as possible, so please respond as soon as you can - even if it is to say "No". Whoever contacts the cattery staff first will get to foster the cat. It is necessary to make an appointment for a specific time to collect them during RSPCA business hours, so that we can ensure there are supplies ready for you and a staff member is able to assist you. At times we may make a call out for fostering via our private Facebook page, if you are interested or able to assist, please let us know.

Introducing a Foster Animal into your home

Introducing a new animal to your home where you already have pets can take a bit of planning. Make sure that you have an area in which to separate animals if there is a problem.

Some key points are:

- Do not immediately introduce your foster animal to your current pets, foster animals will need to take time to settle into the new environment
- Newly introduced animals should not be left alone together unsupervised for the first few days
- Never leave adult animals with kittens unsupervised
- Make sure your own dogs have some basic training. This way you will have some control over them if there is a problem

Cats require a very slow, delicate introduction. It is important to have realistic expectations for both your existing cat and the foster cat; while we would love them to become fast friends this is not always the case.

Some tips for starting introductions include:

- Making sure to keep the routine of the current cat (feeding, playtime etc) the same and ensure they still get lots of attention from you
- Allowing cats to sniff each other under a solid door (they should not be able to see each other at this stage, so no screen doors!). If this goes well you might start feeding both cats near the door, so they begin to associate something enjoyable with the smell of the other cat. Some extra special smelly food may be useful at this stage (please check with cattery about your foster cat about this first). Make sure that both cats are doing this comfortably before moving to the next step
- Swap items such as bowls and blankets to allow the cats to further explore each other's scent. Please do not expect the cats to actually eat from each other's bowls at this stage, you can also use washcloths or socks to 'pat' each cat, then swap.
- Once the cats have been able to get used to each other's smells and general presence, you may be able to allow them to see (but not touch) each other. This can be done through a screen or by carefully opening a door just a crack. If any stress or aggressive behaviour occurs from either cat (growling, hissing, spitting) stop immediately. Give the cats a break for a day or two (no contact at all), then go back to reintroducing via scent
- Once cats are successfully introduced, make sure that all interactions are still supervised until you are completely sure that both cats are comfortable with each other. Ensure that there is easy access to resources (food, litter, toys) for each cat and keep an eye out to make sure these aren't being monopolised by one cat.

- Multi cat households will need one litter tray per cat, then an extra, and at least one food bowl per cat. These can be spaced out around the house as much as possible to ensure privacy.
- This can be a very slow process, but it is important that it is done correctly. Please do not let cats 'just fight it out' or put sardine oil/butter on the new cat (both suggestions that can be found online!). Keep in mind that some cats may never get on - just like humans unfortunately sometimes personalities clash! Our cattery staff are very knowledgeable in introducing cats and can assist if necessary.

7. RETURNING FOSTER CATS

Saying goodbye to foster animals can be difficult, but most foster parents also say that the rewards of giving animals another chance in life far outweigh the pain of parting. And of course, there are always plenty of other cats waiting to fill their space!

Fostered animals must be returned at the agreed time to the shelter to be made available for rehoming. This time is usually dependant on their recovery from illness, injury or surgery or progress on behavioural improvements.

When you have been requested to return the cat, please fill out the return form (this can be done in advance) so we have extra information to give to potential adopters and facilitate the adoption process.

Please remember to thoroughly disinfect the room in which the cat was contained. Start by removing everything they slept on, ate from, played with and eliminated in. Scrub everything the cat could reach (don't forget the walls) with a bleach solution (1 part bleach to 32 parts cold water – you should always mix the bleach with cold water to reduce any harmful vapours). Throw away any non-cleanable materials.

RSPCA ACT retains ownership of the fostered animals until the animal has been rehomed. The rehoming of animals will be conducted in accordance with the shelter's policy for adoption.

8. HEALTH & HYGIENE

Incoming Health Assessments

When animals first arrive at the shelter they are examined by veterinary staff, wormed and vaccinated if required. If worming or other medication is prescribed whilst the animal is in care, the foster carer will be provided with the appropriate medication and must record the administering of the medication. Only give cats medications which were prescribed specifically for them by the RSPCA ACT veterinarians.

Animals fostered through RSPCA ACT will receive free veterinary treatment at the RSPCA ACT Veterinary Clinic which has staff available Monday - Friday and periodic Saturdays. The RSPCA ACT will not reimburse foster carers for veterinary bills for procedures or services that have been performed by outside veterinary clinics unless authorised by the Animal Care Manager. To obtain permission, the Animal Care Manager can be emailed on: foster@rspca-act.org.au.

If you have any health concerns with your foster cat during RSPCA ACT opening hours, please contact the RSPCA ACT Veterinary Clinic via email at foster@rspca-act.org.au or call 6287 8100 for advice. We understand that some emergencies do occur and you may need to take your foster animal to an after-hours veterinarian prior to receiving authorisation. In these circumstances, please contact Canberra Veterinary Emergency Services in Gungahlin on 6225 7257. Let them know you are calling about an RSPCA ACT foster animal and they can provide advice or treatment for you. The shelter must be notified via email as soon as possible in these circumstances.

When you come in for medical appointments, please make sure that the cat is contained in a secure carry cage and check in with reception staff

Common Signs of Disease

Colds and other diseases can spread quickly in a shelter environment. These can range from mild to life-threatening in nature. Treatment depends on the type of disease, the welfare of the animals, and the time required for recovery. It is not always obvious when a cat is sick; in nature, cats will hide any sickness so they don't appear vulnerable.

Non-specific signs of illness include

- Inappetence - not eating or poor appetite
- Excessive and persistent weakness or sleepiness
- Excessive thirst
- Vomiting or diarrhoea
- Bloating of the belly and/or abdominal pain
- Changes in urination habits
- Overgrooming or under grooming
- Limping

Signs of cat flu include

- Sneezing or coughing.
- Clear, watery or thick yellow / green discharges coming from the eyes and/or nose
- Ulcers on the mouth or tongue
- Difficulty breathing or heavy breathing
- Low appetite

Signs of gastro-intestinal problems (including parasitic disease)

- Diarrhoea (watery or custard-consistency faeces)
- Blood in the droppings
- Mucus (jelly-like substance) in the faeces
- Weight loss
- Straining to pass faeces
- Bloating of the belly
- Abdominal pain
- Redness and scalding of the anus-region
- Worms seen in the droppings (especially tapeworms)
- Excessive thirst
- If you notice any of these signs then you must contact the RSPCA ACT for advice.

Worms (roundworms & tapeworms)

Generally, cats are de-wormed when they first come in to the RSPCA ACT. Sometimes after you pick up your foster animals you may see worms in the faeces or litter tray within the first few days. Do not panic or be alarmed as the animals may take a few days to expel the worms after treatment.

Roundworms look like spaghetti, and will come out in the litter box or in vomit.

Tapeworms are white and segmented. Occasionally you will see the whole worm, but more often you will see what looks like dried rice stuck to the cat's hindquarters.

If you see any worms, please speak to one of the veterinary staff.

Vomiting

Vomiting is not necessarily serious unless it is excessive - cats can vomit due to hairballs, stress, eating too quickly or new foods. If your cat keeps vomiting however, email or call the Veterinary Clinic. If the cat has ingested something poisonous, the faster it is treated, the better the outcome.

Fleas, lice, & ear mites

Some of the cats we receive have lived outdoors so they may come to us with fleas. If fleas are noticed at time of veterinary examination, the cat receives a flea treatment. Cats with fleas will scratch themselves a lot and you may see small black dots (kind of like specks of dirt) in their fur, particularly on the neck and at the base of their tail. If you think your foster cat may have fleas, please email foster@rspca-act.org.au so that we can organise treatment.

Lice are a different matter. You will not see the actual adult lice. Instead, you will see white dots on the cat's fur. If you can brush the dots off, it is dandruff. If you cannot remove the dots, then it is probably lice. Make a veterinary appointment and the veterinarian will treat the lice. Lice are species-specific, and you cannot catch them.

Cats with ear mites will scratch their ears and shake their heads a lot. Inside the ears you will see a dark discharge resembling coffee grounds. Make a veterinary appointment to get the cat treated.

Ringworm

Normally the fur around the lips, on the eyelids, and on the ears is a little thin. This is nothing to worry about. However, if you notice hair thinning or completely coming out in patches, please make a veterinary appointment. Fur loss is the first indicator of ringworm, which is a fungus that can be spread to humans and other household pets. The young, the elderly, and people and animals with suppressed immune systems are most susceptible. While it is not fatal, ringworm is itchy to people and very hard to get out of your home. Wash your hands and any clothing that you wear in the fostering room with the cat before touching your pets.

Ringworm may take months to treat. Cats with suspected ringworm must be returned to the RSPCA ACT Veterinary Clinic immediately for an appointment. Depending on the severity you may be able to continue to foster this cat for treatment; however, you will not be able to foster healthy cats for approximately 6 months.

RSPCA will not cover costs for treatment of your family or other pets if they contract ringworm from foster cats.

Toxoplasmosis

This is a disease caused by a parasite which is specific to cats. It is of particular concern because of the risk to pregnant women and their unborn child. Because of this risk, pregnant women are not allowed to participate in the cat foster care program.

Litter boxes should be cleaned daily as this reduces the risk of transmission. Always wear gloves when handling cat litter trays.

Cleaning and Disinfection

Each day litter trays should be cleaned in hot water and detergent. If food and water bowls require cleaning, they should be washed separately from litter trays. It is advisable to wear gloves when cleaning out litter trays. It is very important to return all bowls, litter trays, bedding and carry cages after fostering, so that they can be properly disinfected. You will receive new items for your next foster cat.

Personal Hygiene

Below is a list of important hygiene practices which you are advised to follow to ensure your own health and safety:

- Ensure that you have a current tetanus vaccination
- Wear old, protective clothing that may be thrown away when dealing with sick animals
- Wear gloves when changing litter trays and when cleaning up faeces, urine or vomit
- Wash your hands after handling cats and before preparing and eating food
- Do not allow cats to lick your face or mouth
- Do not allow cats to eat or drink off utensils used for serving food to humans
- Regularly clean bedding, sleeping areas etc. with disinfectants
- Change and disinfect litter trays daily
- Disinfect scratches and bites thoroughly and seek medical advice. Seek assistance when handling animals whose dispositions are questionable
- Report any bites/scratches to the Volunteer Coordinator so that the appropriate forms can be provided

9. COMMON BEHAVIOURAL PROBLEMS

Inappropriate Toileting

Many things may cause a cat to toilet inappropriately, including an aversion to the litter tray (type/amount of litter, cleanliness, location, size), stress, not being desexed, or medical causes such as urinary tract infections/crystals. Any inappropriate toileting by a cat should warrant a veterinary examination. If you have been told that your foster cat has behavioural inappropriate toileting issues, this means that medical problems have been ruled out.

Think about where the cat is toileting; is it a soft surface, a particular corner? This can provide clues as to why the cat is not using their litter tray. Sprays of urine on vertical surfaces usually indicate scent marking, whereas puddles of urine or faeces on horizontal surfaces can indicate dissatisfaction with the litter or general stress. Cattery staff will be able to advise further on your specific foster cat.

Make sure to clean any soiled areas as quickly as possible, using a non-ammonia based cleaner, and keep the litter tray as clean as possible. Consider the location of the tray also - is it near a washing machine or other noisy area, or in a high traffic area of the home? Some cats also prefer 2 trays, one for urine and the other for faeces. Also consider the happenings in your home that may precede an inappropriate toileting incident - was furniture moved, or was there a visitor or dog walking past?

Inappropriate toileting can be frustrating and messy; and is a common cause of adoption returns in cats. Please be patient with the cat - inappropriate toileting is not personal or vindictive; the cat is trying to tell you something. Do not punish the cat or scare them with a loud noise, as this will make the problem worse, and may make the cat fear you.

Petting Aggression

Petting aggression is a normal response to patting/play that has gone on too long or has moved to an area that the cat finds uncomfortable. Some cats will reach their petting threshold more quickly than others. Likewise, some cats show few or very subtle warning signs that they are beginning to have enough. This is often what has happened when a cat “attacks out of the blue”. If your foster cat has been known to display petting aggression, it is important that you are mindful when and how you touch them, and are also monitoring their behaviour, and keeping an eye out for subtle signs such as a twitch of a tail or a slight movement of the body to face away from the petter. Three pats is often a good rule; pat the cat for 3 strokes, then move your hand away and observe. If the cat leans in to you or indicates they would like more, go ahead. If they move away, this is an indication to stop. This will assist greatly in bonding with your foster cat; once they realise that you respect their space and won't push them too far their trust and willingness to be around you will increase.

Cats with petting aggression are not suitable cats to have around children.

10. ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

EAP - Employee Assistance Program



RSPCA ACT's Employee Assistance Program (EAP) provider, Converge International, offers a counselling service which we encourage you and your family to use. This service is totally confidential. The RSPCA is not notified of any details about who uses the service or what is discussed.

You are able to speak to someone on the phone, via internet chat programs such as zoom or face to face. You can contact Converge International on 1800 337 068 or via the website: www.convergeinternational.com.au

Important contact information

Shelter

foster@rspca-act.org.au

6287 8100

Emergency vet

Canberra Veterinary Emergency Service

21 Crinigan Circuit, Gungahlin

6225 7257