

# Foster Care Manual

## Dogs



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## 1. Introduction

The purpose of RSPCA ACT's dog foster care program is to place into temporary care animals that are in the care of the shelter.

The fostering of animals is an important and rewarding experience that RSPCA ACT volunteers and staff undertake and gives the animals lucky enough to be part of the program a stable life before potentially finding their forever homes. We do not always have animals available for foster, but by having a pool of people in different living situations who are ready to take an animal into their home when the need arises, helps us get dogs out of the shelter quickly.

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

Only approved foster carers (volunteers and staff) are permitted to foster animals. The fostered animals remain the property of RSPCA ACT and the fostering program is conducted under the direction of the Dog Foster Care Coordinator. All fostering from RSPCA ACT must be approved by the Executive Manager Animal Welfare or Dog Foster Care Coordinator.

To become a carer for RSPCA ACT you must fill in a foster carer application form. You should have received this form at the same time as this manual. If not, you can request it from the Dog Foster Care Coordinator. Read this manual carefully, then fill in and return the application form if you wish to continue in the process of becoming a foster carer.

Before applications are approved, carers must undergo an interview and a premises inspection. The interview is to discuss any questions you may have and for the coordinator to seek further information required from the foster carer. The premises inspection is to ensure you have a suitable environment in which to care for the animal/s.

There are different types of animals for which you can become a foster carer;

- 🌿 Dogs with an illness or injury that need to recover before they can go up for adoption
- 🌿 Dogs that are becoming increasingly stressed in the shelter environment

- ✿ To determine whether a dog can successfully integrate into a home situation
- ✿ To provide a home environment for dogs coming through RSPCA ACT's Emergency Boarding program

Foster animals remain the property of RSPCA ACT at all times. RSPCA ACT reserves the right to refuse foster applicants and to remove animals from foster care at any time.

### **3. Important Questions to Ask Yourself**

Before you decide to foster for RSPCA ACT...

- ✿ Are you able to get to us quickly in an emergency?
- ✿ Are you able to provide daily walks, games and training sessions?
- ✿ Will you be able to spend quality time with the animals? Walks are not enough - the dogs need social time with you as well.
- ✿ Are you willing to allow the dog inside? It is a requirement of fostering that you allow the dog some supervised time inside with you.
- ✿ Will you be able to commit to vet appointments and/or training lessons if required for your foster animal?
- ✿ Are you willing to work with RSPCA ACT's veterinary care and dog training systems? Please understand that only our vets can treat foster animals free of charge, and only training methods approved by RSPCA ACT behavioural trainers may be used when interacting with foster animals.
- ✿ Are you aware that there is a great deal of clean-up and even possible damage to your home when you take a foster animal home? RSPCA ACT will not be held responsible for any damage incurred while fostering an animal.
- ✿ Do you feel comfortable explaining to friends that any foster animal you may be caring for is not yours to adopt out and that they must go through the regular adoption process at RSPCA ACT if they are interested in an animal?
- ✿ Will you be able to bring the animals back at the end of the foster period? It can be difficult to let go once you have become emotionally attached.

### **4. Fostering Requirements**

#### **What you can expect from us**

We will treat you with respect and in a professional, friendly manner. We will provide you with training to develop your skills and knowledge of dog behaviour and training. You will have continuous support from our Behavioural Training team who are only a phone call away.

RSPCA ACT will provide for your use; food, toys, bedding, bowls, collar, lead and where necessary, a training journal and kennel.

### **What we expect from you**

We expect you to treat us with respect and also in a friendly, courteous manner. You must follow RSPCA ACT's rules, procedures and training programs, and treat the foster animal in your care with kindness and respect. Foster carers don't need to be home all day to look after their four legged charges. However, you must provide for the dog's physical and behavioural welfare including ensuring it has water, food, social contact, exercise, mental stimulation and adequate housing.

Many dogs have a planned training or behaviour modification program for you to undertake. It is essential that you follow the program and document your progress in the training journal. You must only use training methods approved by RSPCA ACT.

You are required to attend some of our continued education/training sessions, and to allow nominated RSPCA ACT staff to visit your home to observe the foster animal. We also require you to provide honest feedback on the dog.

If you already have your own animals then yes, you can still foster. We just need to ensure that any foster animal coming into your home does not have an adverse effect on them. Some dogs love the company of other dogs whereas others may not be suitable to go to a home with other animals. If you have pets of your own, they must be fully vaccinated.

For those foster families with children, we encourage sensible child involvement but dogs and children must always be supervised by an adult when together and parents must assume full responsibility of interactions. Children must not walk dogs without adult supervision.

## **5. Time and Commitment**

A lot of commitment and effort is required in caring for a foster animal. Many of the animals that require fostering have already been through stressful changes in their lives 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.

It is important for foster carers to spend time interacting and playing with their charges. It is still possible for people who work full time to become foster carers providing they are willing to exercise and socialise the foster animal before and after

work. It is in the animal's best interest to stay with the same foster carer until they are permanently re-homed. Transferring between foster homes is not ideal so we appreciate that you carefully consider whether 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 the Dog Foster Care Coordinator should be notified as soon as possible so a replacement carer can be found.

Most foster carers form an attachment to their foster animal. Giving them up, even when they may be going to loving homes, can be a difficult and emotional experience. Make sure that you discuss this aspect of fostering with your family before making a commitment.

The fostering period can be anywhere from one week to many months - each situation is different.

## 6. Preparing to Foster

**Preparing your own pets:** If you have another dog at home, it will be required to meet the foster dog with shelter staff supervision before any fostering is finalised. This ensures that the dogs get along well and are able to live under the same roof. Please review veterinary records for your pets and ensure they have their current vaccinations (proof will be required). Your pets will also need to be desexed, up to date with worming and flea free.

If you have cats or pets other than dogs, introductions to the foster dog must be done slowly and correctly to maximise the chance of a successful integration. If you are taking a dog into these conditions, a trainer will discuss the best way to do this.

**Preparing your house/property:** Walk around your yard and ensure that there are no loose palings on your fence and no gaps underneath that may allow the dog to escape from the yard. Also make sure that outdoor chairs/tables, BBQs etc are not leaning against any fences providing a step for dogs that are looking to go over the fence. Dogs are much more likely to escape in the first few days when they are looking for something familiar so spend lots of time in the backyard with the dog if that is where they are going to be kept when home alone and seriously consider whether there is somewhere inside the dog can stay the first few times it is alone. Any area (inside or outside) that a dog is going to be contained must have adequate shelter from the elements, a bed, toys/enrichment and access to fresh clean water.

Be aware that dogs will play and chew things they find fun whether it's the toy you provided for them, the plants, your shoes or the TV remote. Make sure you 'dog proof' your house and put away all the things you don't want the dog to touch and provide

plenty of alternative things for the dog to interact with. Trainers can provide you with environmental enrichment ideas to help keep your foster dog busy.

**Preparing your family to foster:** Fostering can be a wonderful experience for a family but ensure everyone sits down together to discuss the house rules before the foster dog arrives. If one person allows a dog to jump up for pats and the other person doesn't like it, it will only cause confusion for the dog and it will struggle to learn what it can and can't do. You must be consistent as a household with what you will allow and what you would prefer was not done.

## 7. Fostering a Dog

**Social contact:** The foster dog must receive substantial contact with the family each day. It is more than just training sessions, games and walks. The dogs need to experience 'down time' with the family; that is resting/relaxing with the family during low-key family activities (eg watching TV, reading a book, listening to music).

**Physical health and exercise:** Foster carers must monitor the dog's physical health daily. That includes monitoring water and food intake, elimination, demeanour and activity level, and being observant of any injuries such as strains, sprains, lumps or other injuries. Any concerns for the foster dog's physical health must be reported immediately to the Dog Foster Care Coordinator who will arrange for the RSPCA Veterinary Clinic to contact you.

The foster dog must be walked each day. Besides the physical benefits of a walk, it also allows the foster dog an opportunity to integrate back into the community. Please note that ACT law requires you to pick up after your dog when in public places. Physical exercise also promotes a sense of well-being so we also encourage you to play games such as fetch, tug of war or 'find the toy'.

Never let the foster dog off lead when off your property and do not take a foster dog to a dog park. If you think your foster dog could benefit from a good run off lead, contact your trainer and organise a time to come into the shelter and use our enclosed training yards.

**Mental stimulation:** All dogs need mental stimulation. We recommend you provide something productive for your foster dog to occupy its time with when you leave it home alone. This is referred to as environmental enrichment and we can show you some things that your foster dog may like when you take it home.

**Feeding:** You will be provided with the appropriate Hills Science Diet food for your foster dog when you collect it. Hills sponsor RSPCA shelters across Australia by

providing food for the animals in our care. Hills Science Diet is a premium food and complete diet so dietary supplementation is not required.

Puppies should be fed 3 times per day up until they are four months old. Dogs four months and over should be fed twice a day. If using treats for training purposes please take this extra food into account and adjust the amount of food the foster dog receives for meals.

If the foster dog will not eat the food provided for you please contact the Dog Foster Care Coordinator.

**Toilet training:** Some foster dogs will already be toilet trained when they come to you but as they are coming to a strange environment, make sure you take them out regularly and expect some accidents inside. For those dogs who need some toilet training, here are some things to remember:

- ✿ Go outside regularly with the dog and reward it with a tasty treat whenever it goes to the toilet outside - dogs repeat behaviours they are rewarded for.
- ✿ Do not give the dog free access to your whole house where you cannot watch what is going on.
- ✿ Never punish the dog for toileting inside. This will just encourage the dog to hide when it needs to toilet. If the foster dog has an accident inside, clean it up and remember to take the dog out sooner next time.
- ✿ Dogs are most likely to toilet just after they have woken up, after they have eaten or been playing.

Please note the RSPCA does not cover the cost of carpet cleaning if foster carers decide to give foster dogs access to carpeted areas.

**Dealing with the general public:** In some instances, the foster dog in your care is still going through the evaluation process to determine if it is suitable for adoption. Therefore, you are asked not to promote the foster dog to anyone in the public. If you are asked about the dog, direct them to the RSPCA ACT Pet Adoption Centre. In other cases, you may be fostering a dog who is available for adoption that just needs some respite from the shelter environment. In these cases you may talk freely and honestly about the dog's personality, skills and manner around the home environment when asked, however you must then refer them to the RSPCA ACT Pet Adoption Centre as our adoption processes must be adhered to.

## 8. Euthanasia

RSPCA ACT's priority is to home dogs. However, euthanasia is a fact of life in an animal shelter. Every euthanasia decision is made in consultation with a management team and is the result of the animal not responding sufficiently to either veterinary

treatment or a behavioural modification program. Euthanasia is difficult for everyone who has cared for that animal.

Dogs with obvious health or major behavioural problems will generally not be placed for foster. However, there may be occasions when a dog has been in the foster program and is then subsequently not recommended for adoption. These decisions can be heartbreaking not only for you and your family but also for RSPCA ACT staff and these decisions are never made lightly. Some dogs are placed in foster care to see if they can recover from a medical condition. Not all these dogs end up being suitable to adopt out and you need to decide if you are willing to take a dog from this category into your home.

## **9. Handling the Foster Dog**

All dogs can bite if they are pushed to their bite threshold. For friendly, relaxed, well socialised dogs, their bite threshold is usually quite high, whereas a stressed, irritated or frightened dog has a much lower bite threshold.

Through subtle body postures, dogs are extremely expressive and with an observant eye (that can be trained), you can learn to interpret their body language. By understanding a dog's emotional state you can adjust your handling of the dog accordingly, and therefore minimise the risk of getting bitten.

If a dog makes you feel uncomfortable for any reason (such as it makes the hairs on the back of your neck rise), trust those instincts, leave the dog alone and contact the Dog Foster Care Coordinator.

## **10. Bites or Near Misses**

Although we do what we can to minimise the risk of anyone being bitten, if it does happen you must report it to the Dog Foster Care Coordinator. In these cases our insurance company requires an incident report within 24 hours. Furthermore, it is essential for the safety of the dog and other people that we are made aware of the incident or near miss.

## **11. 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 cleaning up faeces, urine or vomit
- ✿ Wash your hands after handling dogs, especially before preparing and eating food
- ✿ Do not encourage dogs to lick your face or mouth
- ✿ Do not allow dogs to eat or drink off utensils used for serving food to humans
- ✿ Regularly clean bedding, sleeping areas etc with disinfectants
- ✿ Pick up faeces from your yard daily
- ✿ Disinfect scratches and bites thoroughly and seek medical advice and report incidents to the Dog Foster Care Coordinator

## 12. Training Methods

There is so much conflicting information available on the best way to train dogs. RSPCA ACT does NOT advocate the use of aversive training techniques; this includes check chains and physical or verbal punishment. You may only use methods and equipment shown to you by an RSPCA Behavioural Trainer. If you wish to introduce a new practice or method that you feel would benefit the dog, you must firstly liaise with the trainer assigned to you. We can show you techniques for stopping unwanted behaviours and teaching more appropriate behaviours.

As mammals, both humans and dogs are governed by the same scientific learning principles - The Law of Effect. This means that it is the consequences of our actions that determine whether we continue to do something or not. If the action has a pleasant consequence then we are likely to repeat it (such as eating a food we find delicious). On the other hand, if our action resulted in an unpleasant consequence, or even a consequence of no benefit, we are less likely to repeat it (such as eating something that is very sour or has no taste).

When we train our dogs, we want to set it up so that there is a positive consequence for an action that we want repeated. Just as importantly, the dog then enjoys taking part in training sessions and will be a keen, active partner. We can create positive consequences by giving our dogs things they want when they perform a desired behaviour. For example, if you create a positive consequence by giving your dog chicken every time he sits in front of you (as opposed to jumping up), your dog will repeat this behaviour in anticipation of the reward. Food is often one of the easiest rewards to use but toys and games are also highly desirable for some dogs.

Dogs also learn by making associations, and associations can also be positive or negative. When you pick up a dog's lead it gets excited in anticipation of a walk because lead = walk (a positive association). Dogs that dislike the vets but only ever go in the car when they are going to the vets will pretty soon dislike the car too

because car = vets (a negative association). The more positive associations you can create for your dog, the better.

**The problems with punishment:** Just because we have the ability to punish a behaviour (physically or verbally), it does not mean we should. There are a number of reasons why RSPCA ACT does not advocate punishment as a training method. Firstly, it doesn't tell the dog what it should be doing as an alternative behaviour, just that it has the wrong answer. Asking a dog to guess what we want from them but telling them off when they are incorrect creates a hostile training atmosphere. Secondly, because dogs learn through associations, when we punish a particular behaviour they can often associate this with something completely different than what we intended and consequently create more serious problems in the future. For example, if you punish the dog for barking at your neighbours in the attempt to get your dog to be quiet, your dog can easily associate the negative experience to the presence of the neighbours (rather than the barking) and what began as a slight annoyance quickly becomes a full blown aggression issue. As a final point, constant punishment can cause a dog to start defending itself and it learns to fight back.

If your foster dog is displaying a behaviour that you would prefer it did not, think about an alternative behaviour you would like and start rewarding that so that behaviour begins to increase in frequency to replace the original one. Please contact your trainer if you need some advice on how to work with behaviours.