

Decompression Tips for New Foster Dogs



Congratulations, you are opening up your house, your life, your children, and your other pets to a new dog that might otherwise be put down at your local shelter. You are literally becoming a life saver.

Now what?

The first three weeks after bringing a foster dog into your home are the most critical weeks to set your new dog up for success and ensure a successful and peaceful integration into your home.

Each dog you take in is an individual with its own needs. Each dog will have its own past/history to overcome - with your guidance.

The following is a general “how to” guideline on the basic steps every foster should take as they bring a new dog into their home.

Step 1: Chill Out!

Shelters are stressful environments full of strange noises and smells. All that can be overstimulating for a dog, causing them to act out in ways that they might not normally do. Your new foster is going to need quiet time in your house, before anything else.

Basically, the dog needs to *chill out*, which we call “decompression time.” Skipping this step is a sure-fire way to create problems.

You should have a quiet, crated area for your new foster to decompress in. A crate is not a form of punishment. Every tool can be used properly or improperly, and properly used a crate gives a dog a safe “den like” area, which is natural to them. Make sure the foster dog is provided with lots of ways to be stimulated mentally (Kongs with frozen peanut butter, interactive toy games, etc). It’s also a good idea to have music playing in the room. Classical music is great, the tempo slows down the racing heart-beat of a stressed dog.

Stressed dogs destroy crates and act out. Calm dogs do not.

Step 2: Smell Before See. See Before Touch. Repeat. Smell Before See. See Before Touch.

Dogs can learn a lot about the world through their nose. In fact, it is their most powerful sense that they rely on more than eyes or even ears. A dog's nose is many times stronger than ours and some dogs can even detect oncoming seizures and other medical emergencies before they happen.

The foster dog comes to your house already overstimulated from too many people and sounds at the shelter, and needs help to decompress. Alone-time helps the new dog relax, and allows them to explore your home through smells, while remaining crated and secure. The dog can learn about your other pets, children, and other things without the stress of a face-to-face meeting where body language might be misunderstood.

This initial decompression period will probably be one of the most time-consuming – and important – parts of the fostering process. Do this step properly, and life will return to a level of normalcy quickly.

If you have a house with a front yard and back yard, you can set it up like this: Your dogs go out the back to potty in the yard. The new foster dog comes out of the crate and immediately goes out the front door to potty.

When the new foster comes back in, they can explore the house in peace and quiet, roll around on the carpet/rug, and explore all the scents. Then, they get a delicious treat and can enjoy it in the crate.

When the other dogs come back inside, they will smell the foster dog and get used to the newcomer. Then, they get rewarded with delicious treats too.

SEE BEFORE TOUCH

Next, open up another sense for the dog: the sense of sight. The dog's position in the house remains relatively the same, but you can open the door to that room and separate it from the rest of the house with a baby gate. This way the dogs can see each other and get used to each other.

If you have a chain-link fence or similar around your yard, you can also let them dogs see each other while they go to the bathroom. Reward positive body language and redirect unwanted body language. For instance, don't let the dogs sit in one spot and stare at each other. If you need to start at 50 ft away, start at 50 ft away. If you can be a few arm's lengths from the fence without any problems, then start there.

The Greeting

The above points usually take around two weeks. It can take longer or go quicker, but plan on two weeks before moving on to letting the dogs meet.

When it comes to the initial meeting, it's important to think like a dog. Humans like to stand in one spot, make eye contact, and talk. Dogs don't do that. They like to run around and move, they avoid too much direct eye contact, and they're rather smell something than talk.

Going for a walk can be a great place to start. If you can have someone help you, spread it out dog – person – person – dog.

Keep everyone moving forward and remember the 5-second rule: nothing good comes from more than 5 seconds of two new dogs locking eyes. Watch them, count silently in your head, and around the 3-5 second mark, take the lead and redirect the dogs. This way, you can distract them before any negative body language, growls, or snaps happen. Give rewards for good, short interaction

Repeat. And repeat. And repeat. Always short interactions, always ending on a positive note.

Dogs are wonderful, loving creatures and we've enjoyed a mutually beneficial relationship with them for thousands of years. Not all dogs know how to be dogs, but most are willing to learn if we help them. They just need time to learn.

Dogs learn through experiences, both good and bad ones. Through those experiences, they shape their understanding of the world and how to react to certain things.

A dog's way of thinking can be summed up by a sequence of "If – Then" statements. If I see a dog, then I need to do this. If I see a cat, then I need to do this. If someone rings the doorbell, then I need to do this. The more we shape those experiences with positivity, and the more positive experiences we provide, the more we can do for misunderstood, abused, unwanted, and neglected shelter animals that might otherwise have a hard time finding a home.

It is important to be realistic with your abilities, your time, and your other obligations. Set your dogs and your foster dogs up for success!