

Training foster dogs teaches patience to both animal, human

I have fostered more than a few dogs over the last decade, a period that coincides with my career as a dog trainer.

Although I have spent thousands of dollars to attend seminars and conferences all over the country and thousands more on books, educational materials and online dog training courses, I sometimes think I have learned the most from the homeless, problem dogs that have found their way to me for help. With each dog that I have fostered, I have wondered how such beautiful, sweet animals could end up homeless and at the verge of being destroyed.

I can't help but think the staggering number of homeless pets in America has more to do with us as a society than with the animals themselves. We have become an impatient, quick-fix sort of people, preferring to take the easiest route whenever possible. When problems arise in relationships, it often seems more expedient to give up and move on to the next relationship. Just look at the high rate of divorce in our country.

Dogs don't come out of the box with a built-in sense of what humans think is right or wrong. But most are more than eager to figure out what we want from them if we would only take the time to train clearly and consistently. Most of the foster dogs that I've had the pleasure to train have had one or more of the following issues: lack of impulse control, inability to calm themselves or an unclear understanding of what household manners should be.

My last foster dog, Katie, is a good example of a dog that lacked impulse control. Katie is a year-old Australian shepherd/Doberman pinscher cross that loved to get on a scent and run with abandon. She didn't know how to focus in the face of an environment that offered such excitement. After some work, Katie learned that controlling her impulse to run by sitting and staying can earn her the privilege to run in the not-too-distant future. She also learned that controlling her impulses and coming back to me when she heard "come" earned her a fantastic treat and the right to go back to running soon after.

Boomer had the unfortunate experience of being adopted and returned three times before coming to me for foster care and training. That instability caused him to be insecure and contributed to his growing hyperactivity. Boomer needed structure so that he knew what was expected of him. He was taught basic household rules such as "stay off of the furniture," "stay out of the kitchen when I am cooking" and "off" along with "sit," "down" and "come." To help him learn to calm down, he was asked to do down/stays until he finally relaxed. After six weeks of training, Boomer was ready for his forever home. He soon found the love of his life, Cheri, who coincidentally had the nickname "Boomer" in high school.

Billy was a cute black lab cross that should have been easy to adopt out, but his overexuberance in a shelter setting worried people. Once he was in my home for foster care and training, it was easy to see that Billy didn't understand boundaries. One minute he was chasing the cat, the next he was in the garbage or on the furniture. By choosing three nuisance behaviors to work with before moving on to the next three, Billy was able to learn to control himself in just a few areas at a time, something he could manage. Billy now is a well-behaved dog that even listens to the children in his family.

Although training a dog takes time and effort, it's very rewarding. You might find, as I did, that the bigger pay-off is in learning to be a more patient, understanding human.

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