

Fostering cats for health: How do cat fostering programmes benefit companion animals and humans?

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The main aim of the project was to gain a better understanding of the benefits cat fostering programmes bring to companion animals and humans. Cat fostering is an under-researched area, most work focuses on human-animal relationships with other species (e.g., dogs) even though cats are popular animal companions. This project also aimed to explore what cat fostering looks like, along with better understanding how interspecies communication works.

The project was in two phases; 1) a focus group study to talk with volunteer fosterers about their experiences and 2) a video study to observe feline fostering practices in the real time moments where they occurred.

Research Questions: 1. What are the motivations and expectations of volunteer fosterers when joining and experiencing a cat fostering programme? 2. What influence does the programme have on the health and wellbeing of the fosterers and the cats they care for? 3. How exactly do volunteer fosterers care for their animals?

Focus group study

The focus group study recruited 13 feline fosterers with a range of experience, from novice fosterers to people with over 10 years of experience. One focus group was women only, the other was mixed. The discussion guide included questions covering motivations and expectations around fostering; any challenges; what successful fostering looks like; and benefits to fostering. Data were analysed using qualitative content analysis.

Key findings from the focus group study

Motivations of feline fosterers: The most common theme was that fosterers started fostering because of a deep connection to animals or cats specifically; being cat owners themselves in the past. Fostering offered people a useful alternative to cat ownership, as it fits around other commitments and provides an alternative for long-term commitment of pet ownership. The desire to help and knowing they had the ability and skill to foster and being recruited by others who were fosterers were further motivations.

Importance of Emotional Support: Fosterers often find emotional support crucial in coping with the challenges they face. Sharing experiences with supportive staff at the shelter organization or fellow fosterers makes a significant difference. For example, one fosterer found solace in discussing a difficult decision with a veterinarian who understood the emotional impact. Recognizing that all members of the foster care team are impacted helps fosterers navigate these challenging experiences.

Perceived Benefits for Fosterers: Despite the challenges, fosterers derive many personal benefits from their role. Social well-being, mental health, and practical advantages are the three main domains where fosterers experience positive effects. The companionship and positive human-animal relationship fosterers develop combat loneliness and bring joy and pride. Fostering also offers an opportunity to create new relationships within the fostering community. Mentally, fosterers find fulfilment in helping animals

and experience positive emotions when witnessing the development and adoption of their fosters. Practically, fostering allows individuals to have a cat without the long-term commitment or financial costs associated with ownership. It also offers opportunities to learn and acquire new skills.

Perceived Benefits for Animals: Fostering provides cats with a supportive home environment away from the stress of shelters, increasing their chances of adoption. Fosterers play a vital role in preparing fosters for their forever homes, allowing them to blossom and develop positive interactions with humans. This nurturing environment reduces the stress experienced by the cats during their time in foster care.

Foundations of Effective Practice: Fosterers believe effective fostering practices are built on tolerance, adaptability, patience, organization, problem-solving, and a conscious commitment to fostering. Fostering involves providing a secure and comfortable environment, recognizing cats' cues for interaction, and managing time effectively. Fosterers need to be observant of changes in behaviour or health and be prepared to adapt their approach to suit each foster's needs.

Video study

The video study recruited a fosterer with over ten years of experience and recorded her interactions with cats and kittens in her home for two hours. The footage was analysed using conversation analytic conventions to capture details of talk, vocalizations, and embodied behaviours. A synopsis was created to document the general actions and location of the parties, while transcripts captured details of talk, silences, and animal vocalizations. The recordings, synopsis, and transcriptions provided a small but rich dataset for more detailed analysis. One focus of the analysis was moments where the fosterer and foster animal were in physical contact with each other to examine the skilled work of a fosterer and what a trusting, close, attentive relationship between the two parties looks like in action.

Summary

Fostering cats can be a challenging but rewarding experience for individuals, and emotional support from staff at the shelter organization and fellow fosterers can be crucial in coping with the difficulties that arise. Fosterers derive benefits such as social well-being, mental health, and practical advantages from their role. Additionally, fostering provides cats with a supportive home environment away from the stress of shelters, increasing their chances of adoption. Fosterers work to provide a secure and comfortable environment, recognizing cats' cues for interaction and managing time effectively. A video study was conducted to capture details of talk, vocalizations, and embodied behaviours of a fosterer with over ten years of experience interacting with cats and kittens in her home, highlighting the skilled work of a fosterer and the trusting, close, attentive relationship between the fosterer and foster animal.