



Understanding and Supporting a Fearful Foster Dog

As a new foster parent, you may find yourself wondering, *Why is this dog so scared? What can I do to help?* Fostering a dog from a puppy mill or an abusive situation is challenging, and we deeply appreciate those who take on this rewarding yet difficult role. Here are some key insights to help you navigate this journey.

A World of New and Scary Experiences

Everything in your home—its sounds, routines, and even your presence—is unfamiliar and overwhelming to a fostered Bernese Mountain Dog. Common household noises like the dishwasher, vacuum, or television can be terrifying. Even basic human interaction may feel frightening, so patience, calmness, and a quiet environment are essential.

Creating a Safe Space

- Allow the dog as much space as it needs. Some may seek comfort in a crate, while others will avoid it entirely. If using a crate, leave treats inside and let them decide whether to enter.
- Most dogs will find a quiet corner to observe from a distance. Let them come out and explore at their own pace, retreating when needed.

- If the dog allows touch, pet under the chest or chin—never over the head. Use slow, deliberate movements and avoid direct eye contact or approaching head-on.

Helping a Dog Overcome Fear-Based Challenges

- **Eating:** Some dogs may be too scared to eat initially. Avoid forcing food; instead, leave it in a quiet place. Try a clear pie plate instead of a noisy metal bowl or elevated stand.
- **Stairs:** Many rescue dogs have never encountered stairs. You may need to guide them, step by step, until they feel confident.
- **Visitors:** New people can be overwhelming. Ask guests to move slowly, speak softly, and ignore the dog rather than attempt to interact right away.
- **Doors & Exits:** Doors can be particularly frightening, and some dogs may bolt when they open. Keep doors still when encouraging them to go through, and always use a leash outdoors—even in fenced areas—to prevent panic-driven escapes.

The Reward of Patience

Rescuing a fearful dog takes time, but the first moment they approach you willingly, accept a pet, or show happiness in your presence is priceless. Through patience and trust, you will teach them that people can be kind—and for the first time, they will experience what it means to be loved.