



Fostering Jagger

When it came to integrating a fight-bust dog into his new home, slow and steady won the race

By his mom, Jennifer



Bringing a new dog into your life, especially when you have other animals, can be challenging. I hope that sharing how we worked Jagger into our lives and into our home, we can help other people integrate rescue dogs into their homes successfully. Before I get into the steps we took, here's a little background information to explain our story.

Before I took in my first pit bull, Kayla, I was nervous. At that time, I had one Dachshund – a spoiled rotten only dog. I also didn't know much about pit bulls aside from their bad rap. What I did know about my first pit bull was that she had been horribly neglected and needed a second chance at life. Luckily, she instantly fell in love with my Dachshund. Within days she had dispelled my fears and won over my heart.

Kayla was a quick learner, but she was also afraid of everything. To battle her fears, I took her out for many social experiences and walked her a great deal. I took her in just as the Victory dogs were making headlines, and I followed their moving story.

Their story gave me the confidence later to work with Jagger.

Meeting Jagger

Bringing home a dog that was a victim of dog fighting naturally brings with it many concerns and emotions. First I had to introduce him to Kayla, and unfortunately, their initial meeting didn't go well. Luckily, when we were given the opportunity to try again with him, we took everything slowly and monitored each dogs' body language closely. We're big believers in the old saying "slow and steady wins the race" and, because we wanted to adopt Jagger, we decided to go as slow as we needed to in order to set everyone up for success. The steps outlined below may seem slow and drawn out, but if you're considering fostering a dog, it's helpful to go through the steps, even if you are able to proceed quicker than we did.

Step One: Walking

While walking may sound simple, it can be an invaluable tool for getting dogs used to each other. For a couple of weeks, I drove out to the shelter with my pit bull and a friend or relative every day. We picked up Jagger and went to a nearby park (neutral territory). My friend would walk Kayla, and I walked Jagger. He pulled hard at first, but he learned quickly that I was not going to move until he stopped. Once he stopped pulling, we could walk forward.

Remembering how Kayla and Jagger's initial meeting didn't go so well, our first few outings involved the two dogs walking in the same vicinity where they could see each other, but there was some distance between them. In the beginning Jagger watched Kayla, and she'd eyeball him back. When they stopped watching each other and acted as if they didn't care that the other dog was near, we would shorten the distance between them. The walking training continued for a number of weeks. Every time the dogs acted like they could care less about each other, we moved a little closer to each other.

I worked on refocusing his attention. Since we were at a park, there were often dogs around. Every time he would lose focus on the walk, I would pull out a treat and call his name. At first his reaction time was slow, but it sped up over time to when I would call his name, he would instantly look to me for a treat.

Step Two: Sleepovers

I started taking Jagger to basic obedience classes offered through the group that rescued him, Treat Em Right Rescue (TERR). After class, he would sleepover. When he came into our home, he was confined to one room blocked off by a baby gate and monitored by a human the entire time he was not in a crate. He also had to meet our other dogs Harley, and Daisy. They're little dogs, so we weren't as concerned about how he'd react to them.



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To introduce Harley and Daisy to Jagger, we went to a park and took a walk on neutral territory. After our walk, we transported all the dogs home. We set up our guest bedroom for our guest dog. We put a crate in the room and a baby gate in the doorway of the room. Jagger got in his crate at first. We let the other dogs roam freely on the other side of the baby gate. I stayed near the doorway in the room with Jagger, and my husband stayed on the other side of the gate with the other dogs. When the curiosity and excitement subsided, and all dogs were calm and relaxed, Jagger stayed in his crate, and I let one dog in the room at a time for a few minutes. Then they were separated by the gate again. After some time passed, I went in the room with Jagger again and waited for all the dogs to calm down. Then, holding Jagger on a short leash, each dog was again allowed in for a few minutes, one at a time. We repeated this step a few times until the dogs would quickly lose interest in each other.

During the mini visits, calm behavior is always rewarded, so we made sure to have lots of treats on hand. Every time Jagger was in our home, we had high value treats for our current dogs so that way they would associate having him around with good things. We also made sure to show a little extra attention to our current dogs when they would demonstrate calm, desired behaviors – for added reinforcement and to counteract any jealousy they may initially have felt. Because Jagger was staying overnight, we also had to contend with mealtime. We did not know if Jagger was food aggressive or not, but to be cautious we always fed him in his crate during the first couple of sleepovers. After a couple of successful sleepover weekends, we started fostering Jagger.

Step Three: Fostering

The dogs were progressing well on their mini one-on-one visits with Jagger, so we kept repeating this step with increasing time and increasing freedom by allowing more interactions. All the while, making sure that both dogs would still come to us when called out of their interactions, and rewarding them for stopping and coming to us. Jagger was also doing well in adjusting to the small portion of the house, so the next step was to bring him out into the rest of the home. We set up a playpen for Jagger in the main living part of the house. He was off leash in his play pen with the other dogs outside of his play pen. This was an especially important set up for Jagger's success. Having him watch how life works in the main part of the house and learning from the other dogs what was and was not acceptable behavior was essential for him, and he watched intently. He still got his mini visits one on one with each dog, too. Because Jagger was also attending obedience classes, all dogs worked on their skills at home together – Jagger on the inside of the playpen and the rest of the dogs on the outside of it.



Soon we took down the pen and gate down, but we kept Jagger on a leash. This step went fantastically, and we decided to have a movie night on the floor with all dogs together. We took all the dogs for a walk to expire their extra energy. With chew bones for each dog and Jagger on a leash, we all watched a movie together with no barrier. The dogs chewed their bones and fell asleep. We still lingered on the side of caution and fed Jagger separately. In the same fashion that the barrier/playpen time went away, so did the leash. Jagger earned his way to roaming free with the other dogs as long as he was being supervised.

We continued to practice obedience skills each day. Every treat required a sit. We also still call the dogs out of their interactions with each other, pet them and love on them when they come to us, and then release them back into play. Practicing all of these things ensures that things will not get out of control, and if energy levels get too high, we can put a stop to whatever is going on instantly, which is reassuring for us. Taking each new step slowly brought about much success and built our confidence.

Step Four: A Happy Ending

All of this hard work paid off. Jagger became a permanent member of our family.

Just this past month, Jagger and Kayla passed their CGC evaluations and became official Canine Good Citizens!