

Rabbits & Children: Is a rabbit a good pet for your child?



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Your child has been asking for a pet. You consider getting him a dog or a cat but think about how much of a commitment having a family pet can be. Then, you think about getting a rabbit. Why not? Rabbits are perfect pets for children. They are cute, cuddly, spend most of the time in a cage and don't seem to require much care, right? Wrong!

DISPELLING THE MYTHS

Myth #1: Rabbits are docile and cuddly.

Rabbits are often portrayed by the media and in children's books as being cuddly and docile. Most people are disappointed to find that most rabbits just simply do not live up to this stereotype. Rabbits generally do not like - and even fear - being lifted off the ground or carried. They have a delicate skeletal structure, and may be easily injured trying to escape from a child's arms. A rabbit's sharp nails and powerful back legs may also cause injury to a child.

Myth #2: Rabbits are low maintenance pets.

Rabbits have needs that are similar to other house pets. They require sufficient mental stimulation as well as physical exercise in a bunny-proofed area each day. Cages and litterboxes need to be cleaned often to prevent odour. Rabbits have very specific dietary requirements. When rabbits are ill, they require care from a qualified veterinarian. They also benefit from being spayed and neutered.

Myth #3: Having a pet teaches a child responsibility.

Many parents say they want to get a pet for their child to teach the child how to be responsible. While this sounds good in theory, it's more likely that the child will end up losing interest in the pet. The pet is then either neglected or given away. In either case, the child doesn't learn responsibility. Even worse, the child will sometimes learn that life is disposable and that if he just waits long enough, someone else will relieve him of his "responsibility".

So, does this mean that you shouldn't get a rabbit for your child? No, not necessarily but, as the adult in the family, it is important to realize that you will be the primary care taker of the rabbit. Therefore, it is essential that you understand what rabbits are like and what proper care entails. Understanding proper rabbit care

is beyond the scope of this handout, but we will briefly describe what rabbits are really like. (For information on proper rabbit care, please contact us or visit our web site at www.ontariorabbits.org.)

WHAT IS A RABBIT REALLY LIKE?

It is very important to remember that every rabbit has a unique personality and that specific character traits cannot be generalized by breed. However, most rabbits do exhibit one or more of the following traits:

1. Rabbits are social animals. Rabbits are social animals. Most really enjoy the company of either another rabbit, a human, or sometimes other animals such as dog or cat. This, of course, is determined by the personality of the rabbit and the other animal in question. Some dogs and cats may be aggressive towards a rabbit and should never be left alone with a rabbit.

2. Rabbits are curious. Rabbits are curious. Want to get a rabbit's attention? Simply sit on the floor in his area, read a book and ignore him. Most rabbits wouldn't be able to resist approaching to find out what you're doing.

3. Rabbits need sufficient physical exercise and mental stimulation each day. Rabbits need sufficient physical exercise and mental stimulation each day. For bunny-proofing tips and suggestions for suitable toys, see our handout "Rabbit Behaviour: What we can learn from it" or visit our web site.

4. Rabbits are clean. Rabbits are fastidious groomers, and are easily litter trained. If you keep your rabbit's cage/area clean, he won't have an odour. See our web site or our handout on litter training for tips.

5. Rabbits love routine. Changes to feeding and exercise schedules are stressful and may lead to illness or a badly-behaved rabbit. If a schedule must be changed, introduce changes gradually.

OTHER THINGS TO CONSIDER BEFORE GETTING A RABBIT

In addition to doing research, and learning what having a rabbit involves, there are other things you must consider when deciding if a rabbit is right for you and your child.



1. Do any of your family members have allergies?

Do any of your family members have allergies? If so, it is important to make sure that they aren't allergic to rabbits before bringing one home. Note: Many people are allergic to hay (a staple in your rabbit's diet) and NOT the rabbit itself.

2. Consider your child's personality. Consider your child's personality. If your child is calm and cooperative, a rabbit may be an appropriate addition to your family. On the other hand, if your child is loud, tends to interact physically/aggressively, or frequently needs to be reminded of rules, then a rabbit probably isn't a good choice.

3. Consider your child's age. Consider your child's age. Rabbits are rarely good pets for very young children (younger than 7 years old). Very young children do not have the coordination to interact with a rabbit and may accidentally hurt it. However, if you are willing to supervise their interaction, then a rabbit may be appropriate.

4. Does your family have time for a rabbit?

Does your family have time for a rabbit? Are you and your child prepared to make time for the rabbit, which involves cleaning, feeding and socializing. This is a commitment that can last 6-10 years.

TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL INTERACTION

Now that you've considered the rabbit's needs and have determined that your child would interact well with a rabbit, here are some tips that may help you to maintain a happy household.

1. Show your child how to pet the bunny. Guide your child's hand over the rabbit's head, ears, and upper back. To prevent fur-grabbing, hold his hand flat or use the back of his hand. Do this frequently but stop if the rabbit seems bothered by it. Always supervise your child's interactions with the rabbit. You may even want to have your child practice with a toy, stuffed bunny first.

2. Rabbits need to feel secure when being handled. If a rabbit does not feel secure, he will struggle and kick in an effort to escape. Children simply aren't physically strong enough to be capable of making a rabbit feel secure. For this reason, larger bunnies often make better companions for children than smaller breeds. Children are less tempted to try to and pick up a larger rabbit.

3. Children like to be able to pick up their toys and pets and carry them around. Always teach your child to interact with the rabbit at ground level, since most rabbits feel more secure at ground level. Explain to the child that you or another adult will always be the one who picks up the bunny for grooming, etc.

4. Make interactions with the rabbit a positive experience for the child. Explain to him that it is his special job to not scare the rabbit, not to pick up the rabbit, etc. Avoid constantly using negative words like "Don't" and "Stop".

5. Teach your child to leave the rabbit alone when he hops away or goes into his cage. It is helpful to interpret the rabbit's body language for the child to help him to understand. For example, tell the child that "I think the bunny wants to eat or nap now. Let's leave him alone for a bit."

6. Discourage your child from chasing a rabbit, poking at him through the cage or banging on his cage. This can be done by explaining: "Chasing the rabbit will make him afraid of you." Or "Banging on his house scares him." It is important that you learn how to interpret rabbit behavior/language so that you can explain the rabbit's feelings about your child's actions. Sometimes, it is also helpful to compare the bunny's feelings to a feeling familiar to your child. For example, tell the child that "Banging on the rabbit's house scares him. You know how you are scared sometimes of loud noises?"

7. Teach the child that the litter box and the rabbit's droppings are "dirt" and always use a broom and dustpan to sweep up the rabbit's droppings when the child is around. A litter box with a grate over top or a wire bottomed cage works well.

8. Create a "safe zone" where the rabbit can go for quiet and to escape. Use baby gates in doorways and or consider turning the cage so the door faces the wall with enough room for the rabbit but not for the child.

Always remember that a rabbit - or any other companion animal - should be considered an addition to the family and not as a toy for a child. You, as the adult, must be the primary care taker of the animal. No child is responsible enough to assume such a job on a daily basis. Children learn by example, so it is important for adults to set a good one.