

Close Encounters of the Furry Kind: Understanding Your Rabbit

More information on rabbit care can be found at www.rabbit.org

The Rabbit Personality

"Is a rabbit more like a cat or a dog?" It's one of the most frequent questions we rabbit folk are asked. The answer: neither. Dogs and cats are predatory animals, with evolutionary histories completely different from those of herbivores, such as rabbits. Whereas the ancestors of today's dogs and cats were bred for centuries to lack their natural fear of humans, domestic rabbits have been bred primarily for meat, fur and other physical characteristics. This means that when you adopt a bunny, you adopt a "domestic" animal with much of the heart and spirit of a wild creature whose ancestors survived only if they were alert, easily startled, and had a natural tendency to avoid large, scary-looking animals like humans! It may be more challenging to win the trust of this sensitive, intelligent creature than it is to win the heart of a puppy or kitten, who has been bred to trust you from birth, but it's worth the effort.

The myth that certain rabbit breeds make better pets is just that: a myth. We have known aggressive lops (a breed supposedly gentle and friendly), super-affectionate dwarfs (supposedly hyper and mean) and every type of personality you can imagine in our "mutts." Some rabbits are friendly from the day they're born, whereas others are shy and retiring. Once in a while, we'll meet a true Attila the Bun, with an aggressive nature that can't easily be tamed. There are as many rabbit personalities as there are rabbits!

Rabbits are highly intelligent, social and affectionate. They also can be bratty, willful, destructive and even vengeful. It takes a special type of person to be able to coexist happily with such a complex, demanding little soul.

Unfortunately, many people buy rabbits without understanding their true nature, and this is one of the main reasons so many rabbits are "dumped" soon after reaching sexual maturity, when they begin to assert their strong personalities.

Bunny Handling--and Not

One of the most common misconceptions people have about rabbits, possibly because they look so much like plush toys, is that they like to be held and cuddled. Many people are disappointed to learn that their bunny does not like to be held. But consider for a moment the natural history of the rabbit. This is a ground-dwelling species, and a prey item for many predators. It is completely against a rabbit's natural tendency to want to be held far above the ground where he cannot control his own motions and activities.

When you force a bunny to be held against his will, you reinforce his innate notion that you are a predator trying to restrain him. Holding a rabbit while he struggles and kicks is not only dangerous for the human (sharp claws!), but also for the rabbit. A rabbit is built for quick escape, with powerful muscles attached to a relatively light, flexible skeleton. When a bunny is held in the air, he lacks the natural "brake" of the ground against his hind feet, and one powerful kick can hyperextend the spine, causing it to subluxate or fracture. We have seen an alarming number of young rabbits with broken backs and legs because people (usually children) insisted on carrying them around and handling them against their will. A very few rabbits enjoy being held and cuddled. The vast majority do not, and prefer to snuggle on the ground, with you lying close (like a fellow bunny!). If you love your bunny, you'll respect his

preference, knowing that his safety and well-being depend on your playing with him on his own terms.

This is not to say that a rabbit can *never* be picked up. Sometimes, as for trips to the vet, a rabbit must be handled, and it's best to learn to do this safely before you have an emergency. A rabbit should *never* be handled by the ears! To safely pick up a bunny, gently and simultaneously place one hand scooped under the ribcage, and the other splayed around his rear end. Lift quickly and confidently, and turn the bunny so that his feet are placed against your chest. This will make him feel more secure, and less apt to struggle. If he struggles wildly, carefully and firmly lower him to the ground and release him, then try again. Practice makes perfect. But remember that for playtime situations, it's better not to force the issue of holding and cuddling.

Getting to Know Your New Bunny

To understand rabbit behavior, try to think like a rabbit. Remember that as a prey species, a rabbit is naturally more shy and wary than a predatory dog or cat. It will be up to you, the adaptable human, to compromise and alter your own behavior so that the bunny understands you are a friend. Once you have done this, you will have won the unending love and loyalty of a most amazing creature, whose ways of communicating with you may be as subtle as a nose bump on the leg ("Hi, Mom!"), or as overt as a skin-breaking nip ("Put me down!") or an adamant thump of the hind foot (which can mean anything from "Mom! There's something scary outside!" to "Hey! Pay attention to me!")

Imagine what the world looks like to this bunny. She's surrounded by a new environment, and there's a big, strange-smelling animal that's always looming over her. She has no idea you're trying to be friendly. Her "hard wiring" tells her: "AAAAAAGH!!! It's going to EAT ME!" Imagine yourself in her bunny slippers: No one speaks her language, she has been taken from her family, has no one of her own species to comfort her, and she has no idea whether you plan to love her, cage her forever, or have her for dinner! You must gradually and patiently earn her trust. It can take an hour, a day or even weeks or months. It depends on the personality of the individual rabbit, and on your willingness to be patient and loving.

You and bunny should be together in a private, quiet room. No other pets. No distractions. If children are present, they should be instructed to lie on the floor, too, being very quiet and emulating the behavior of the adult in charge. Stress to the children that getting to know a bunny is a little bit like waiting for a butterfly to land on your head than chasing it around with a net and forcing it to hold still.

Have a little treat, such as a carrot or piece of apple, banana or a little pinch of oats in your hand. Lie prone on the floor and let the bunny out of her hutch. (This should be at ground level so that the bunny can come out and go into the hutch as she pleases. Having to grab the bunny every time you want her to come in or out can undo hours of patient trust-building. The door should either swing to the side or fold down as a ramp. If it's a ramp, be sure it's solid or covered with a towel or mat so that toes or feet don't become dangerously snagged!)

Don't expect the bunny to approach you immediately. Remain quiet and patient, even if it takes an hour or more. Rabbits are naturally curious, and eventually, she will come over to sniff you, and perhaps even climb up on your back for a look around.

If the bunny is very shy, resist the temptation to reach out and pet her. Instead, let her sniff you, hop on you and get to know your scent. Eventually, when she sees that she can move

freely around you without being touched or grabbed, she will learn that you are not a threat.

If bunny smells the treat you have, and comes to investigate, hold onto it while she nibbles, instead of letting her grab it and run off to eat in a private place. This will establish that she can safely eat in your presence without worrying that you're going to grab and restrain her.

Have a "bunny playtime" like this every day until it becomes routine, and bunny loses her wariness around you. Touches should come gradually. Extending a finger or hand for her to sniff is a polite overture, and she may allow you to gently rub her forehead, ears, or her temples (the smooth areas on the sides of her head, just below her ears). These are favorite rabbit "scritch spots," and a shy bunny is more likely to allow you to touch her head than she is to let you rub her back or any other area where she can't really keep an eye on you.

If bunny withdraws from your attentions, let her. Be patient, and never force anything. Never, *ever* chase the bunny. Despite what you might here from other sources, we've never met or heard of a rabbit who truly likes to "play chase." That's a predator's game, and is more likely to cause terror and stress in your bunny than entertain her. This is one reason that boisterous children and rabbits are NOT a good match!

Rabbits and Children

In most cases, children and rabbits are not ideal companions. A rabbit's delicate skeleton and prey-species nature predisposes him to be fearful of the attentions of most active, happy children, however well-meaning they might be. It takes a very special, mature child--willing to follow the procedure described above--to make a good companion for a rabbit.

Some people tell us they are disappointed that the rabbit is "not turning out to be the sort of pet we wanted for our kids." Such folks may have had unreasonable expectations for a rabbit, expecting him to behave more like a dog or cat than a rabbit.

Rather than being disappointed that a rabbit is naturally shy, and not what you might have expected, take the opportunity to teach your children respect for a very different kind of animal whose behaviors and ways of communication are not the same as their own. If a child wants something to carry around and cuddle, provide a stuffed toy--not a live rabbit.

Even if your rabbit is the "family pet," an adult should always be his primary caretaker. Young children don't have the sense of responsibility necessary to properly care for a rabbit, and should not be expected to behave as adults, especially if the safety of your companion rabbit is at stake. Parents also should be ready to take over the rabbit-care duties of the teenager who goes off to college, leaving Fluffy in their care. A well cared for house rabbit, spayed or neutered, can live eight to ten years, or even longer.

She is a Sentient Creature, not a Toy

Look at your rabbit with enlightened eyes. Understand that nature made her just as surely as it made you, and that, like yours, her personality is at least partly a product of her ancestry. She is not a toy; she is a highly intelligent, loving being who can become an interactive, loyal member of the family if you allow her to be what she is--a rabbit! The person who can do this is in store for the most delightful companionship of a lifetime.