

YOUR FIRST HOUSE RABBIT: WHAT TO EXPECT

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Personality

One of the single most frequent questions about rabbits as companions is: Are rabbits more like cats or dogs? The answer: neither. Dogs and cats have been bred for centuries to not be afraid of humans. Rabbits have been bred primarily for meat, fur and physical characteristics, which means that when you adopt a bunny, you adopt a lovely, domestic animal with the heart and spirit of a wild animal. It is much more challenging to win the trust of this sensitive, intelligent creature than it is to win the heart of a puppy or kitten, which has been bred to trust you from birth.

The myth that certain rabbit breeds make better pets is just that: a myth. There are aggressive lops (supposedly gentle and friendly), super-affectionate dwarfs (supposedly hyper and mean) and every type of personality you can imagine in hybrids. There are as many rabbit personalities as there are rabbits!

If we had to compare rabbits to any other animal, we might say they have a temperament more like that of a parrot. Rabbits are highly intelligent, social and affectionate. They can also be bratty, willful, destructive and vengeful. They are very... rabbit. And it takes a special type of person to be able to live happily with such a complex, intelligent, demanding little soul!

One of the most common misconceptions people have about rabbits is that they like to be held and cuddled. This is probably because they look like plush toys. Unfortunately, many people acquire rabbits without realizing the true nature of rabbits, which is one of the main reasons these lovely, intelligent creatures are dumped shortly after they reach sexual maturity and begin to assert their strong personalities.

Bunny Handling - and Not

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 animal and a prey item for many predators. It is completely against the nature of the rabbit to be held far above the ground where it cannot control its own motions and activities. When you force her to be held against her will, you reinforce her notion that you are a predator who is trying to restrain her. Holding her while she struggles and kicks is not only dangerous for the human (sharp claws!), but also for the rabbit. We wish we didn't know how many young rabbits come into our vet's office with broken legs, necks and spines because people, usually children, insisted on carrying them around and handling them against their will. If you love your bunny, you won't let this happen to him or her.

Thinking Like a Rabbit

To understand rabbit behavior, begin to think more like a rabbit! Here's a starter's guide.

Step 1: Buy a copy of *The House Rabbit Handbook* by Marinell Harriman. It's the most accurate, up-to-date book about rabbit care on the market.

Step 2: Remember that a rabbit, unlike a carnivorous, predatory dog or cat, evolved as a prey species. Hence, most rabbits are naturally shy. It is up to you, the flexible human, to compromise and alter your behavior so that the bunny understands that you are a friend. Once you have done this, you will have won the unending love and loyalty of one of the most special creatures in creation.

Here's the best way to win your rabbit's trust:

1. 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" says, "AAAAAAHHHHHH!!! It's going to EAT ME!!!!!" Imagine yourself in her bunny slippers: No one speaks her language, she has been taken from her family and maybe the only home she has ever known, and she has no idea whether you plan to love her, cage her forever or eat her! 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.
2. You and bunny should be together in a private, quiet room. No other pets. No distractions.
3. Have a little treat, such as a carrot, piece of apple, dried papaya or banana in your hand.
4. Lie on your tummy on the floor and open the door to the bunny's hutch. Do this at ground level, so that your bunny can come out and go into the hutch as she pleases. Having to grab your bunny every time you want her to come in or out can undo hours of patient trust building!
5. Don't expect her to approach you right away. 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.

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6. Resist the temptation to reach out and pet the bunny. Instead, let her sniff you, hop on you and just get to know your smell. This will teach her that you are not a threat and that nothing bad happens when she approaches you.
7. If the bunny finds the treat you have, hold it while she nibbles. Resist the urge to pet, if she's shy!
8. Do this every day. Gradually, you can start to pet the bunny by giving her a gentle scratch on the forehead (bunnies love this!). Never force anything and never chase the bunny. This, too, will only undo all the patient sitting you have done to gain her trust.
9. Once the bunny learns that you are a friend, she will bond very strongly to you. It's important to have him neutered or her spayed once he or she reaches sexual maturity; otherwise, he or she will want to make love to everything. (See our other handouts for more information.)

Rabbits and Children

In most cases, children and rabbits are not ideal companions. A rabbit's delicate skeleton and prey-species nature predisposes him/her to be fearful of the attentions of most active, happy children, no matter how well meaning. It takes a very special, mature child, who is willing to follow all the above steps, to make a good companion for a rabbit.

Some people are disappointed that the rabbit is not turning out to be the sort of pet we wanted for our kids. Rather than being disappointed that the rabbit is not what you expected (most rabbits never learn to like being held or handled extensively), take this opportunity to teach children respect for a new kind of animal. If they really want something to carry around, they need a stuffed toy, not a live rabbit.

And, of course, an adult should always be the primary caretaker of the rabbit. Young children don't have the sense of responsibility necessary to properly care for a rabbit, and the parents should be ready to take over the duties of the teenager who goes off to college, leaving Fluffy in their care.

She is a Sentient Being, not a Toy

Now look at your rabbit with new eyes. She is not a toy; she is highly intelligent, potentially loving, loyal creature who can become a member of the family if you allow her to be what she is - a rabbit! If you can do that, you are in for the most delightful companionship of a lifetime!

Join the Family of the Rabbit!

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