

Rabbits and Children

by Carolyn Mixon



Children & rabbits are natural companions - right? The answer could be yes, no, or "maybe so" depending on many factors. Are you thinking of getting a rabbit for your child? Are you trying to figure out how to live with both a rabbit and a child since having a baby? Does your family already have a rabbit? Are you finding that the children and rabbit do not interact as you had expected? Did your family agree that the rabbit would be the "children's responsibility" and now that is not happening? Then, please read on! What's a Rabbit Really Like?

Many people are surprised and disappointed to find that rabbits rarely conform to the cute-n-cuddly stereotype in children's stories. Baby bunnies (and many young adult rabbits) are too busy dashing madly about, squeezing behind furniture, and chewing baseboards and rugs to be held. Also, **rabbits are physically delicate animals which means they can be hurt by children picking them up.** Because rabbits feel frightened when people pick them up, they kick and struggle which means children can also get hurt. Rabbits are also built to react to sudden changes which means they may either run away or try to bite when approached too quickly and too loudly. Stress-related illnesses are common. For these reasons, **many children, especially young children, will find it difficult to interact with a rabbit and soon lose interest.**

So why do they make good house pets? Rabbits:

- are quiet and can learn near-perfect litterbox habits
- have different personalities
- are fun to watch
- don't need a yard if given plenty of indoor, sun-lit exercise space.

Rabbits are social animals meaning they need the companionship of humans or other animals, although the need may vary among individual rabbits. They play, some more than others. Many can get along with most cats and some dogs when properly introduced. Many enjoy being with people but your family must have patience, understanding, and an acceptance of individual differences to earn their trust.

In order for a family and a rabbit to get to know each other (and for the rabbit's best health), the rabbit needs to be an indoor pet with as much out-of-cage time with the family as possible. If you relegate your rabbit to an outdoor hutch (or even to an indoor cage for most of the day), your family will miss getting to know the special personality of the rabbit.

As the adult, you need to get used to this idea: The rabbit will be YOUR pet. Rabbits are very sensitive to changes to their feeding, cleaning, and exercise routines. Changes are stressful and may lead to illness. Symptoms of illness are often subtle changes in appetite, behavior, and/or droppings that even mature children will miss. It is unreasonable to expect a child of any age to take responsibility for care of a rabbit (or any pet). The rabbit and your children, as well as the family peace, will benefit greatly from you accepting this notion.

If your family is considering adopting a rabbit, decide how you and the other adults in the household feel about taking on the responsibility of a rabbit. Do the adults want a rabbit as a member of the family? If the rabbit is an all-around family member (lives indoors, gets regular out-of-cage time) and play with the rabbit is supervised, then a child and rabbit can get to know each other and live together happily. Do the adults have an understanding of the basic nature of rabbits and what to expect in terms

of time, training, and cost? Or, are you open to finding out? Are the adults willing to make a 5 to 10 yr. commitment? Unless the adults of the household are enthusiastic, informed, and committed about the work involved, a stuffed animal rabbit is a better choice.

You don't have to be "Super-Adult" to have peaceful coexistence between rabbit and children. But, do you want another "toddler"? **Rabbits are a lot like 2 yr. old children-they can be a joy to live with, but:**

- You will need to spend time in toilet-training i.e.: litterbox training and have tolerance for accidents. Most rabbit people take occasional scattered droppings in stride. There may be an occasional puddle, usually done to mark new territory.
- You will need to bunny-proof the parts of your house where the rabbit is allowed to run, somewhat similar to toddler-proofing.
- You will need to check on your rabbit often and supervise child/rabbit interactions when the rabbit is out for exercise. Three to four hours per day of out-of-cage time is the minimum.
- Some of your things may be partially ruined. The amount of chewing and digging that your rabbit does will depend on age, personality, whether spayed/neutered, as well as on what toys you provide him.
- Your rabbit will need toys but these can be homemade.
- Just like human toddlers, rabbits respond to routines for feeding, playing, and cleaning up. The main thing is to find a routine that is easy for you. If the routine is too difficult, you will begin to look at the rabbit as one more mess-maker.
- A rabbit, like a child, responds best to situations that are set up so he will do the right things and receive praise for doing right instead of punishment for doing wrong.

Other Factors: Your Child's Personality

If your child is generally easy-going, calm, gentle, and cooperative, you may enjoy having a rabbit as a member of the family. If your child is generally on the loud side, very active, tends to interact physically/aggressively, or frequently seems to need reminders about or challenges rules, s/he may find it difficult to build a relationship with a rabbit and you may find that a rabbit is an additional stress.

Other Factors: Number of Children & Ages

Contrary to Easter-time hype, rabbits are rarely a good choice for a small child (younger than 7 yrs.). The natural exuberance, rambunctiousness, and decibel-level of the average toddler is stressful for most rabbits. Children want a companion they can hold and cuddle; Rabbits need someone who understands that they are ground-loving creatures.

The guidelines below are based on what children of varying ages are genuinely like while keeping in mind the type of household most rabbits do well in. Of course, rabbits and children do vary and there may be exceptions to these guidelines. The most important factor is most likely the adults' attitude and knowledge level.

1. One Child Younger than 7 Years – Probably shouldn't get a rabbit unless your child fits the "calm" description and you are an informed adult who wants to deal with another toddler. It can be done though, if you have the time and patience.
2. One or More Younger than 7 Years – Probably shouldn't get a rabbit. You are likely very busy with active children who need a lot of your attention which will probably leave you little time for managing a rabbit.
3. One Younger than & One Older than 7 Years – Perhaps. Your time, the children's personalities, and the general noise/activity level of your household should be considered. If your younger

child is "on the move and into everything, it may be difficult for you & rabbit to live happily even if the older child is of the "calm" type.

4. 1 or More Older than 7 Years – Perhaps. Again, your time, the children's personalities, and the general noise/activity level of your household should be considered. Lots of friends coming & going will probably stress out a rabbit. Your children may also be involved in quite a few activities (music lessons, sports, etc.) which may leave little time for the rabbit & family to get to know each other.
5. One Younger and 1 or More Older than 7 Years – Probably shouldn't get a rabbit. Consider the information in 3. & 4. above, but your household is most likely too busy and noisy to build a friendship with a rabbit. Caring for and training a rabbit may be "just one more thing" that the adults have to do.
6. Two or More Younger than & One or More Older than 7 Years – Probably shouldn't get a rabbit. Consider the information in 2.-5. above.
7. One Child Older than 7 Years – If you are enthusiastic about accepting responsibility for a rabbit and if your child is the calm type or at least generally accepting of rules for behavior, you and a rabbit would probably find it a joy to live together. If your child is of the loud/active/ challenging rules variety, a rabbit may just increase your stress level.

Allergies

If any of your family has allergies, you should have testing done to see if there is an allergy to rabbits before you get a rabbit.

Teaching Children to be Rabbit People

Once you have brought a rabbit home, it is well to remember to:

- Learn about rabbit behavior/language so you can point out the rabbit's feelings about your child's actions.
- Choose a time of day when your child is on "low ebb" for teaching your child about the rabbit and for play with the rabbit.
- Set your child and the rabbit up for success. Try to anticipate and prevent inappropriate interaction by often showing your child how to interact.
- Try not to get into a pattern of always saying "Don't..." and "Stop..." to your child about the rabbit. If your child does something inappropriate, show and talk about what the child can do with the rabbit. Offer choices for behavior and ask "What could you do...?". Otherwise, your child may see the rabbit as something he is always getting in trouble for.
- Keep the child away from the rabbit for a short time if the child refuses to stop a behavior that may hurt the rabbit.
- Set up the cage so rabbit can get away from the children – "a safe zone". Use child gates in doorways and or turn the cage so the door faces the wall with enough room for rabbit but not the child.
- Put the rabbit in a closed-off room when there are lots of playmates or parties. It is often better if the guests "don't know the rabbit exists". Refrain from having children's friends in to "see the new rabbit" for the first week or so.
- Show children's friends where rabbit lives and how to pet at times when only 1 or 2 friends visit, then make sure the rabbit is safe during the visit.

Choosing a Rabbit

Rabbits have different personalities so it is difficult to make generalizations about breeds. In general though, a medium to large breed adult rabbit is usually better for a child. They will command the most respect from a child and are easier to pet because they have larger heads. Dwarf breeds tend to be more excitable, energetic, and aggressive. Baby rabbits are very active, often nippy, and chew everything in sight. Adult rabbits are more easily litter-and house-trained, especially after spaying or neutering. You will also have a better idea of a rabbit's personality if you choose an adult who is spayed or neutered.

Many parents say they want to get a rabbit for their child to teach the child some responsibility. What usually happens is that the child loses interest (not to mention being incapable of sticking to a routine and providing proper care), and the rabbit suffers. The child, at best, learns to feel bad that she has failed and caused suffering. At worst, she learns to resent the animal for the nagging that she is hearing from the adult. Often, the rabbit is given away because "you didn't take care of it". The child learns that life is disposable and that if she waits long enough, someone else will relieve her of her "responsibility".

So, let your child help with the rabbit, but don't insist. If the child appears interested, encourage her; if she becomes bored, let her move on to the next thing, and you carry on with the rabbit. She learns most of all from watching you-your actions, your tone of voice when you speak to the rabbit, and your attitude. From this she learns the nurturing (responsible) point of view- the patient waiting, the faithful caring, the joyful appreciation and acceptance of a living creature for who it is, not who you wish it to be.

This information is based on material from the House Rabbit Society
and on the experiences of the author.