



Archie's Exotic Pet Rescue

www.archiesrescue.ca

Bunnies & Children



Bunny Owner & Then Having Children

Although Archie's Angels Rabbit Rescue highly recommends that you do not adopt rabbits until your children are older, we realize that many have had their sweet furry friends long before having children. Questions may arise, such as:

1. Will I be able to keep my furry friend of so many years once my baby arrives?
2. Will my baby be safe with a free roam bunny in the house?
3. Will my bunny be safe from my growing baby?
4. As my baby grows to be a toddler and then a child, how do I teach respect and bunny care to my child?

We hope the information on these pages will help you decide and to know what you can do.

Are you concerned your child may be in over their head with a bunny? As adults, we must model pet caretaking skills for our children. That's how they learn! This also ensures the family rabbit is getting what they need and your child isn't left feeling overwhelmed and confused about what to do to keep the bunny happy and healthy. Owning a pet requires responsibility and an ongoing commitment to its wellbeing. Taking these steps will help your child care for their pet in the right way.

Understanding Animal Dietary Needs

At first, your toddler may want to offer a slice of pizza or crackers from snack time to his hamster. We love the concern this shows for the pet, but now it's your turn to teach which foods are appropriate for the bunny. Feeding is a very important part of the relationship with your rabbit. A proper diet can ensure a happy and safe bunny.

Start by showing the child the packages of foods for the rabbit. For example, bunny food pellets, rabbit treats, and a package of chew sticks could be kept in a small tote so the child learns that's where the pet's food is stored. Then point out where the food bowl is in the bunny's habitat so the child knows where to pour the food. For older children who can read, create a list to keep with the food. Be sure to include fresh produce treats on the list that need to be retrieved from the refrigerator. Also, include how often the bunny should be fed and how much food they need each day. This detailed information sets your child up for success!

Finally, rabbits get thirsty just like us. Let your child know all bunny's need access to clean water at all times. Make it part of your daily routine to check the pet's water bowl for fullness and cleanliness. Then, show how to rinse and refill it with fresh, cool water so your rabbit can enjoy a satisfying drink.

Learning About Rabbit Habitats

Every bunny needs a place to call home, within your home! This keeps them safe from other pets, small children, and household hazards. Just like humans, keeping a clean and safe home environment will help your bunny feel calm and happy.

First, explain to your child the pet will live in his own habitat. For example, a rabbit's home needs to be large enough for roaming, a litter box, and a hiding place in addition to his food bowl, a rack filled with Timothy hay, and a water dish.

Next, explain the rules of free roaming within your home as a time for your rabbit's zooming and play time.

Here are some steps you can encourage your child to take when caring for the bunny's home:

- Establish a regular feeding and cleaning time for the rabbit's habitat. Maybe it's right after school or before dinner time.
- Require a daily checkmark (use colorful pens!) on the wall calendar for the child to complete. This way both you and the child can see at a glance that the bunny was cared for each day.



- Pair care time with playtime. After the bunny has a freshened litter box or food bowl, the child can bond over a few minutes of playtime using the rabbit's toys.



Socializing Your Bunny Matters, Too

Remind your child how they felt on the first day of school or daycare. They may have been a bit nervous or unsure of how things would go. Likely, your bunny is feeling this way too during their first week home. To make the rabbit welcomed and loved, work to actively socialize the bunny with the family. With the right type of gentle interaction for just a couple of hours each day, your rabbit will learn to be more social and your child will bond more securely with the bunny.

Teaching the animal a trick can be a great activity for both the child and the animal. Then,

let the child show the cool skill off to the whole family. And, have the camera ready for a few snaps! Or, head outside for some fun in the fresh air! Too hot out? Try a cool indoor playtime activity to socialize your pet. Or, snuggle up with a children's book and let the bunny go onto your child's lap. Let your little one read to the pet to create a beautiful bond. Bunnies are family members. By making the health and happiness of your rabbit in your home a priority, your kids will quickly learn the best ways to care for their furry friends from your examples. You got this!

Rabbits Don't Like to be Held

Rabbits are generally not cuddly animals, though there are some that can be. They are prey animals, which means rabbits have survived by being quick to run away and hide from large predators, so they don't get eaten. While domestic rabbits were bred to be friendlier than their wild ancestors, they still have the instinct to run away and hide when they sense danger.

This means that rabbits like to have their feet on the ground at all times. If they are being held, they can no longer run away, and they don't feel safe. They may struggle to get out of the child's grip, potentially injuring them in the process.

The next time a child goes to pick up the rabbit, they will remember and run away or lash out.



Young children may treat a rabbit like a beloved stuffed toy rather than a living creature. Rabbits have a delicate bone structure and can easily be injured by a child who squeezes too hard or picks them up in an inappropriate way.

Usually, you wouldn't find a rabbit off the ground unless they are being held or picked up. Rabbits are prey animals that stay low to the ground and are naturally skittish, so knowing the proper way to hold your bunny is important. It will help to decrease their fear and over time they will grow accustomed to the feeling of being picked up and held.

Remember as you begin to practice holding your bunny that you want to make sure they feel safe and loved. If they don't you'll never be able to get them comfortable with getting picked up and held.

Read through these other tips and you'll be able to bond with your bunny in the best way!

1. Get on the same level as your rabbit and begin petting them. Towering over them can scare them and lead to a frightened pet. Try to soothe your rabbit so they are calm. Kneel down to the ground when possible.
2. When picking up your rabbit to hold against your body, place your hand under their torso. Then place your other hand by their bottom / hips, leaving their feet to dangle. This will help give you control if your rabbit chooses to attempt to leap out of your arms by not allowing them to use your hand as a platform to push off of.
3. Once your rabbit's body is against your body, hold your rabbit to resemble how you hold a baby (cradling them). The reason why you need to use both hands is to allow the rabbit to feel safe. Making sure your rabbit is safe is essential for holding a bunny correctly.
4. When setting your rabbit down, it is important to remember that it will try to jump out of your arms the second it sees an opportunity. So make sure that you place their hind legs down first and keep a tight grip on your rabbit until they are securely on the ground. If you aren't careful, they can fall out of your arms and get seriously injured.
5. Make sure that you **do not pick them up by their ears, legs or scruff**. You may see this on your Saturday morning cartoons but this can cause serious harm to your rabbit and is not the proper way to pick them up.



Teaching Children to be Rabbit People

Whether you have brought a baby home to your rabbit's house or have brought a rabbit home to your child's house, it is well to remember to:

- Learn about bunny behavior/language so you can point out the bunny'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 bunny. If your child does something inappropriate, show and talk about what the child can do with the bunny. 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.
- Explain to your child the reasons why certain behaviors aren't appropriate for the bunny. Most children are sensitive to the needs of others and are far more responsive to behavior modification if they understand why they are causing distress or harm.
- Keep the child away from the bunny for a short time if the child refuses to stop a behavior that may hurt the rabbit.
- Set up the pen so bunny can get away from the children—"a safe zone". Use child gates in doorways and or turn the pen so the door faces the wall with enough room for rabbit but not the child.
- Put the bunny 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 at least the first week or so.
- Show children's friends where bunny lives and how to pet at times when only 1 or 2 friends visit, then make sure the rabbit is safe during the visit.



What You Can Do with Different Ages

Sitting/Crawling Infants (6-12 months)

- Start teaching the idea that the rabbit is to be respected and treated carefully.

BUNNYRULE #1: Gentle petting.

- Sit on the floor with child in your lap while you pet and talk to the rabbit. Guide their hand over the rabbit's head, ears, and upper back. To prevent fur-grabbing, hold her hand flat or use the back of her hand. Do this frequently but no longer than 5 mins. at a time.

BUNNYRULE #2: Leave the rabbit alone when he hops away or goes in his cage.

- Interpret rabbit's body language for the child ("Oops, he didn't want anymore petting. He wants to eat or take a nap.) Prevent the tendencies to chase a rabbit who has had enough and to bang/poke on the cage by explaining: "Chasing him will make him scared of you." or "Banging on his house scares him." Watch your child carefully and make such explanations at the moment before it looks like the child may engage in such behaviors. Explaining, then redirecting the child's attention works best for this age when inappropriate behavior seems imminent or occurs.

BUNNYRULE #3: Don't touch droppings and litter.

- Teach the child that the litterbox and droppings that may be found on floor are "dirt". You may have no problem with picking up the dry droppings with your hand, but you don't stick your fingers in your mouth! You may have to change your habits for awhile to teach this concept.

Toddlers (1-2 years)

- Continue reinforcing or teach BUNNYRULES 1-3 and add #4. Although unintentional, toddlers are capable of doing real harm to a rabbit. They will need constant supervision and frequent gentle reminders of appropriate behavior. See below for additional notes on rules.
- Due to still-developing muscle coordination, toddlers have a hard time keeping fingers out of rabbits' eyes so you may have to insist on two-finger petting or back-of-hand petting.
- Closely supervise children's interactions with the rabbit. This is the stage of the child's development when some are prone to bash things with sticks. Children this age also have a hard time not chasing a rabbit who hops away. If she chases the rabbit, the rabbit will learn to be scared of her. Teach respect for the rabbit ending the petting or playing session ("Well, that's all he wanted to do.") and interest the child in another activity.
- Children who are interested in toilet-training can understand "that is where the bunny poops and pees."

BUNNYRULE #4: We pet, but don't pick up the rabbit.



- Explain that it scares the rabbit to be picked up and both of you could get hurt. Explain that Mom or Dad may pick up the rabbit if she needs care. Explain rabbit language & actions: “Hear her teeth grinding? She likes the petting. See her toss the ball? She’s playing.” If child gets scratched, explain what the child did to scare or hurt the rabbit and show a better way to act. Redirect loud play to another area (“Look at bunny. She doesn’t like the noise.”) Toddlers love to share their snacks with the rabbit so make sure rabbit gets only small amounts of proper foods and is not given cereals and crackers. They also love to help with feeding – scooping & pouring food, taking vegetables and hay to the rabbit.

One- to Seven-Year-Old

- If a 2-year-old has grown up with a rabbit, they can have quite a bit of empathy for, and knowledge about a rabbit. Continue or teach BUNNYRULES #1 through 4. Teach by example instead of by a lot of “No!” Your child will learn most by watching you. If interested, the child may help with feeding and play with the rabbit with your supervision.

Older Children

- Continue or teach BUNNYRULES #1 through 4. Teach by example and setting up situations for success. Your child may build a friendship with the rabbit by sitting on the floor with the rabbit while doing homework, art work, reading, or watching TV. The rabbit will eventually come to investigate and to be petted. Older children have lots of other interests and interest in rabbit may come and go. The rabbit’s care should continue to be your responsibility, but your child may help with feeding and grooming.

“It is not easy to manage young humans and animals, but when parents find solutions, rather than dispose of an animal for convenience sake, an important concept is communicated to the child. This is alive. This is valuable. You don’t throw it away.”

– Marinell Harriman, Importance of Permanence