

A Rabbit In A New Home

How will a rabbit handle a new home with children and a cat?

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Posted: June 13, 2009, 3 a.m. EDT

Q: I have owned a rabbit for about five years. Unfortunately, I will be moving out of my parents' house and into an apartment that does not allow pets. I was fortunate enough to find that some of my close friends want a rabbit for their daughter.

Do you have any advice on relocating my rabbit to their home? He is an indoor rabbit and his large cage will be going with him. I'm worried about how he'll handle the move, because they have two small children and a cat. He has been an only rabbit for a long time, and he hasn't been around children for extended periods of time.

A: This is really sad. I am sure your rabbit will miss you a lot. If I were you, I would keep searching for an apartment that will allow you to take your rabbit with you. If you do decide to give up your rabbit, here are my suggestions.

Invite the family to your house to meet the rabbit. Make sure the whole family comes so you can talk to all of them and go over proper rabbit care, such as diet, housing and exercise. Make sure they know it is a big commitment to take a rabbit into their home. A rabbit that has been spayed or neutered, is on the proper diet and lives indoors can live up to 12 or 13 years. Are they willing to care for the rabbit for the rest of its life? Are they willing to take the rabbit for yearly vet checks with a rabbit-savvy veterinarian? What happens if the children lose interest or move out? Are they willing to brush the rabbit and keep the living quarters clean?

The parents need to be just as interested in having a rabbit in their home as the children. All too often parents get a rabbit for a child, and when the child loses interest, the rabbit is often taken to a shelter or left outside; this is why there are so many homeless rabbits.

Rabbits do shed, plus they need unlimited hay, so make sure that no one in the family has allergies.

When the family comes to your home, ask the children to sit on the floor and let the rabbit come to them. Show them how to gently stroke the rabbit. Watch and see how the parents interact with the children making sure they are doing what they are shown. If the parents aren't in control of the children, I wouldn't suggest putting a rabbit in that home. Children often see a rabbit as a fluffy toy, and parents don't always want to care for the rabbit.

If the children are gentle and do as they are told, and the parents are eager to learn all about rabbit care and understand the commitment it takes, then this situation could very well work out.

As far as the cat, it must be spayed or neutered so it doesn't have as much of a prey drive. We suggest clipping the cat's nails before the rabbit comes into the home. The family should set the rabbit up in a pen, in a room that can be closed off to the cat. Once the rabbit has been given some time to settle in, a family member should hold the rabbit on the couch so the cat can see the rabbit. The cat needs to get used to the fact that a rabbit now lives in this home and is part of the family.

The rabbit and cat should see each other for short periods of time for a few days or weeks to get them used to the situation. Often the rabbit will become the boss of the cat. If a cat is sleeping in a bed the rabbit wants, the rabbit will often hop over and nudge the cat out of the bed.

Once the rabbit and cat are getting along, the rabbit can be moved into a part of the house where the family spends most of its time.

The cat must not be permitted to scratch the rabbit. Cat scratches can turn into abscesses on a rabbit, which need medical treatment.

We suggest exercise pens for rabbits to live in. An exercise pen has enough room for a rabbit's litter box, hidey-house and toys, plus enough room for the rabbit to run around and have fun. A cover can be purchased to put atop the pen so the



cat can't jump in.

Go over the rabbit's nutritional needs, including a diet of limited pellets (the average 5-pound rabbit should only get about 1/8 to 1/4 cup of pellets per day). Feed unlimited grass hay in a big litter box and a daily salad made up of fresh, washed greens.

Give the family your rabbit's toys, bed and litter box so there will be something familiar in the new home. Also write down the daily routines for feeding, grooming and play time so they can stay the same if possible.

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