

Socializing Your Rabbit

Tips for how to keep your bunny bouncing happily.

By Laura Doering

Q: Do rabbits make good pets for children?

A: First and foremost, think of a rabbit as a pet for a family with children as opposed to a pet for children. The younger the child, the more adult supervision is needed in the rabbit's care and upbringing. A pet rabbit needs fresh water and fresh food daily. And being the social creature it is, a rabbit needs consistent companionship. The adults in the household must ensure the rabbit's basic socializing needs are met.

Rabbits are very delicate, more so than cats and dogs. They can be easily injured if handled incorrectly. And nothing ruins the rabbit-human bond like forced holding, incorrect carrying, tugging on ears, pulling on tails, unwelcome poking or chasing — which makes for a timid, skittish, fearful and unsocial rabbit. Again, consistent adult supervision is warranted in households with young children.

Q: Does my rabbit need a companion?

A: They might not bark in excitement or wag their tails in greeting, but, make no mistake, rabbits are social creatures. They crave companionship. According to Natalie Mathis, founder of Rabbit Rescue Inc., the ideal companion for your rabbit is another rabbit. "I think every bunny needs another bunny," she said. "If you're gone eight to nine hours a day, you're not around to give your rabbit the attention it needs."

In terms of choosing two rabbits, Mathis recommends socializing a male and a female, but stresses that they should be neutered and spayed prior to pairing. "Males tend to have more spats when paired with other males, and females tend not to do that."

Sharing your life with two rabbits doesn't make you the odd one out. "People fear that their bunny will ignore them because of the other bunny, but this has not been my experience," said Mathis. "Your first bunny might not greet you at the door. Instead, you'll find the two snuggling, and then one or both will make their way over to you. It does change things. They're not totally dependent on you for attention — which is good — but they still love you."

Q: Does my rabbit need toys and playtime?

A: Rabbits are curious by nature and need mental stimulation in the form of toys and play to increase their social interaction. A rabbit toy isn't necessarily a ball or Frisbee (as for dogs), or ball of yarn and wind-up mouse (as for cats). Nevertheless, don't put it past a rabbit to play with any of these. Rabbits particularly enjoy wood pieces to chew, paper to shred, places to dig, toys to toss around and boxes and tunnels to hide in or run through.

Wood toys are not only fun for rabbits to chew up, but they also help keep a rabbit's continuously growing teeth in check — and they might just save your furniture from being chewed up. Make sure the wood is vegetable-dyed, as opposed to painted. Safe, shreddable items include newspaper and brown lunch bags (which can be filled with rabbit-edible treats).

A rabbit that wishes to dig will do so. For house rabbits, supply an alternative to your carpet. Natural, untreated grass mats or a box filled with shredded paper make good digging items. Rabbits also enjoy and need plenty of out-of-pen social time, a chance to run about and explore a room. (Make sure the room has been thoroughly rabbit-proofed and that your rabbit is reliably using a litter box before allowing it the run of a room.)