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Rabbits in Schools

INTRODUCTION

If you have, or are considering getting, a classroom rabbit, or a rabbit for your school the House Rabbit Society asks that you take some time to consider:

- the nature of rabbits, which are by nature a timid, prey animal
- their needs, include a quiet, stable routine and environment
- what do you want your students to learn from having an animal in the classroom?
- what your students will learn from rabbits living in a school environment in not always conducive to teaching them respect for the animal's welfare

The House Rabbit Society does not place rescued rabbits as classroom pets

We consider that few classroom environments can meet the many needs of rabbits as a home environment could. If you are considering a classroom rabbit, we hope we can convince you that ***it is not be a good idea***.

If you already have a classroom rabbit, we would like to help you improve the life of your classroom rabbit or one you know. All it takes are commitment to the rabbit's well-being and accurate information about his or her needs.

ISSUES TO CONSIDER

- **Rabbits are intelligent** and have a highly developed social order. If their personalities are not stunted by boredom or abuse, they commonly display affection, anger, jealousy, delight, annoyance, fear, submissiveness, grief, dominance, guile, contentment, mischievousness, curiosity, sadness, and joy.
- **When neutered and spayed**, pairs will affectionately snuggle and groom each other, and the dominant will engage in protective behaviour. They commonly enjoy playing with toys, especially those that can be chewed, tossed, pushed, or hidden under.
- **Rabbits communicate in many ways**. Rabbit "language" includes tooth-clicking, tail-wagging, dancing, charging, bowing, nudging, ear signals, licking, honking, and growling. They quickly learn what the word "No!" means. Many learn to respond to their names. Others, like cats, know their names but choose not to respond. Some can be taught to respond to other voice commands, such as "Give me a kiss" or "Go to your cage!"
- **What is the cost to the animal** for a few weeks of "oohs" and "aahs" from children?

- **Breeding a classroom rabbit** so that children can experience the birth and development of the young is a distressingly common practice. However, rabbit births are rarely witnessed because they occur quickly, and usually at night.
- **Classroom breeding too often results in rabbits who suffer from stress and die** from improper care. Some highly stressed rabbit mothers or fathers will cannibalize the young and witnessing such an event can be traumatic to young children.
- **A hutch is not enough.** If the rabbits survive to maturity, they often become marginalized pets in small cages or backyard hutches which become their prisons. Others are killed outright, abandoned outdoors, or taken to a municipal shelter, where they stand a good chance of being killed, even if they are healthy and friendly.
- **We believe that observing animals and humane behaviour toward animals** can be better reinforced by quality interaction with a healthy, happy rabbit or other pet.
    - **Rabbits can be litter trained:** Swatting, or rubbing a rabbit's nose in the "accident," only frightens and confuses them. Some rabbits seem to take to the litter box naturally, while others require your patience and time to learn. HRS can provide tips on encouraging the litter box habit.
    - **Spaying and neutering:** Spaying and neutering by a veterinarian experienced in rabbit care improves health, personality, anti-social behaviours, litter box habits, and the ability to get along with other rabbits. Usually, faeces and urine odours are greatly reduced by the reduction in hormone production, and the instinct to spray urine is eliminated. Overall, adult rabbits tend to be more easily trainable, calmer, less prone to chewing and digging, and more people-oriented than young rabbits.
- **Rabbits are often seen as a low-maintenance pet or a teaching tool**, a human centred view which minimalizes the importance of the welfare of the animal. Sadly, many people's perception of what rabbits are like is based on erroneous assumptions and experience with neglected classroom or backyard pets.
- **It's common to see rabbits sitting all day (and night) in small classroom cages.** True, unlike many species, rabbits endure such a life quietly, as they are not vocal animals. But rabbits need exercise and stimulation to maintain health, good spirits, and normal behaviour. A constantly caged rabbit becomes withdrawn and aggressive, resulting in symptoms such as lethargy, unresponsiveness, obesity, or neurotic and aggressive behaviours. They also develop skeletal malformation.
- **Within a few years, most rabbits confined in such a setting become ill and die.** That's not a normal life span. With proper care, domestic rabbits can live 8-12 years or longer.
- **Animals as objects.** If no one makes a significant investment of time, attention, and care of a classroom rabbit, the result is a withdrawn animal who does not have much to give back to the students. Regardless of what teachers or parents believe about the care of a classroom animal, what do such practices show students about the value of living beings?
- **Shelters are overflowing** because of the common perception of animals as objects to be passed around, cared for only when it's convenient for people to do so, then abandoned when they become too much of a bother.
- **All animals are individuals**
    - with individual personalities and preferences.
    - Animal languages are different from one another
    - Each animal species requires different behaviours on the part of humans who want to befriend them. What a dog may regard as a playful overture may be perceived as a danger or threat by a rabbit.
    - Responsible pet ownership means finding out about the animals needs and meeting the animal's needs, even when it's inconvenient. Cleaning, training, and "bunny-proofing" are time consuming, but they are part of the commitment a pet owner should make.

- Rabbits have delicate health needs and are grazing animals. If the rabbit does not eat and the carer does not notice and take intervention, then the rabbit will die quickly. Stress and other triggers can bring on gut stasis (a rabbit not eating).

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF BEFORE GETTING A CLASSROOM RABBIT

1. Are you committed to caring for a rabbit as your pet for 8-12 years?
2. Are you fully committed to giving the rabbit consistent, on-schedule, care? Because of the way rabbit digestion works, food, hay, and water must be available at all times. Cages and litterboxes should be cleaned daily of soiled matter and must be thoroughly scrubbed weekly, to avoid parasites which cause illness in rabbits.
3. How will you ensure that the rabbit receives a routine and proper care when you are not around? Rabbits need consistent care, including on weekends and during vacations.
4. Sending a classroom rabbit home with a student or a succession of students can result in severe stress to the animal, and possibly gut stasis and death. Improper care through ignorance is likely, even in the most well-intentioned families.
5. **Being left at school has its risks.** Many teachers have returned to school on Monday only to find a dead animal in the cage that housed an apparently healthy one on Friday.
6. **Outdoor housing is not acceptable** due to predator, intruders and viruses carried by mosquitos. Outdoor rabbits become fearful and revert back to their prey instincts for protection, often running away from those approaching their enclosure.
7. **Are you willing to monitor your rabbit closely for illness?** Rabbits need the care of someone who can quickly recognize small changes in behaviour, eating, and droppings. These are the first symptoms of illness, which can progress quickly in these small creatures.
8. **If your rabbit is sick, can you afford to have him treated?** It can be difficult to find veterinarians who are knowledgeable about treating rabbits. If you make a vet visit and medication or other care is prescribed, are you prepared to give it?
9. **Do you have space for a 1 metre by 2 metre enclosure**, both at school and at home? Who will foot the bill for a humanely sized enclosures?
10. **Who will give the rabbit 4 hours of time** outside their enclosure a day?
11. **What would happen if the air conditioning or heat at your school is turned off** outside of school hours, or if pesticides are sprayed? Rabbits, because of their thick coats, begin to show distress at temperatures above 85° F. Rabbits are so sensitive to pesticides that even common flea preparations are likely to cause serious illness.
12. **Are your students mature enough to understand** the lessons you want them to learn from the rabbit and are they capable of treating the rabbit appropriately?

    - Pre school children should never be left with a rabbit unattended. They can bite and scratch is distressed.
    - As a prey animal, a rabbit should never be housed in a noisy classroom and most classrooms are noisy.
    - Children under 8 are not mature enough to safely interact with a rabbit and must have close, constant, supervision.

13. **Do you have the time to teach students the proper behaviour with an animal** and to monitor their interaction with the rabbit? Adults must be committed to teaching and enforcing rules that protect both the child and the rabbit from physical and emotional trauma.
14. **What will you do if a child is injured by the rabbit or *vice versa*?** Young children love to pick up and cuddle animals. However, most rabbits feel safe only with four feet on the floor or other stable surface. Spinal injuries and dislocated or broken legs are common when

rabbits struggle or fall when small children try to hold them. Children can also be badly scratched or painfully bitten by a frightened rabbit as she tries to escape.

15. **Are you willing to "bunny-proof" your classroom** so you can allow the rabbit the out-of-cage time necessary for his well-being? Rabbits like to chew and dig, but their destructiveness can be managed by managing their environment, training, and other methods. Rabbits should get at least three hours of exercise daily.
16. **Is your classroom comfortable for a naturally timid prey animal?** Stresses present in classrooms include noise, over-handling, improper foods and diet variations, disruption of routine, temperature changes, and loneliness.
17. **Does your principal approve of uncaged pets?** If not, are you willing to take the rabbit home?
18. What will happen to the rabbit if a student is allergic? Will you be prepared to take the rabbit home and keep her there?

DOC AND WINNIE WERE CLASSROOM RABBITS

> *Once you live with a rabbit, you realize just how far off the mark are the generally accepted notions of them. Why would anyone consign these sensitive, subtle creatures to life in a classroom? Even in those rare situations where (unlike the animals described below) the rabbits' short-term physical requirements are met, social, emotional, and psychological needs are impossible to provide for. Nor are the students coming away with the intended lessons. They may hear about "respect and responsibility," but they see a rabbit who is being used and who in most cases is disposed of when her usefulness ends. Doc and Winnie were of the few lucky ones. Hopefully their story below will inspire others to act as Carol McCall did.*
>
> *Amy Espie*

I am Carol McCall and I have rescued two rabbits and a guinea pig from the high school where I teach. They were not dramatic interventions; they were more like a gradual adoptions. The first was Doc, a big, handsome red rabbit. The biology teacher had gotten him from a woman who was stuck with him when his first family (her relatives) moved out of town.

> "**With the unexamined notion that classrooms are an ideal habitat for bunnies, she couldn't wait to foist him off on the teacher."**

My colleague, equally ignorant about rabbit behaviour, thought Doc would hop around the classroom while she taught. (Even if he had performed according to her expectations, I can't see how that would have helped students to concentrate.)

Doc arrived in a wire dog-crate, which she lined with newspapers. She gave him water and food in plastic bowls. As soon as he hopped onto the linoleum lab floor, he slipped and hit his chin. After that brief experience, he refused to come out of the crate. By the end of the day, when I first saw him, he was sitting on wet newspapers, with pellets and faeces scattered all over the crate. From then on he retreated into the furthest corner of his sorry prison. Since the crate didn't open from the top, it was impossible to reach him without crawling in there with him. So he sat all alone in his crate in a corner of the lab, surrounded by big black laboratory tables and the din of classes in progress.

I kept visiting, making suggestions. She bought a water bottle. She switched to a heavy glass food dish. After I learned that he was going to be left all alone over the weekend, I asked if I might take him home with me. Since she had cats and kids at home, and no time to spend letting the cats and rabbit get used to one another, she readily accepted my offer. After taking him home each weekend, it was natural to have Doc spend Thanksgiving with us. Although I gave him a bath and cut his extremely long nails when I had him at my home, his fur was soon wet and matted when he got back to his crate in school.

Finally the biology teacher had a week-long conference to attend. She knew the substitute teacher would not take care of Doc, and the students had lost interest in him. He just sat in the corner all the time, on newspaper wet with urine, so they decided this was a dumb bunny, not worthy of their attention. Once again, Doc came to our home, this time for nine days. He began to get used to living with me and my two rabbits. On Monday morning when the biology teacher returned, she asked me if I would consider keeping Doc permanently. So it was settled.

I bought him a large enclosure, with a big cat litterbox. I put a thick cotton bathmat on the wire floor so Doc would have a choice of lying on wire, in the litterbox, or on the soft mat. He got fresh hay and a variety of greens. But more importantly to him, he got freedom. Over a few weeks' time, Doc went from a shy rabbit, to a lovable, curious, determined guy. He chewed my baseboards, got into the shoeboxes in my closet, and ran the length of the apartment. He even hurled his big red self, high up into the air in joyous bunny leaps.

> **"If only the students could see him now, I thought, they just might learn an important lesson about respect for other living beings. Doc wasn't "dumb"; he'd been surrounded by ignorant humans."**

Winnie The next time I rescued animals from a school situation also came from a biology class. In this instance the teacher had been presented with a rabbit and a guinea pig by a fellow teacher whose nephews no longer wanted them. (The kids had already put out one of the guinea pig's eyes.)

Like Doc's former caretaker, this biology teacher knew very little about rabbits. I soon stopped by and lent her several books, including House Rabbit Handbook. Weeks later, when we were talking about the animals' behaviour, it was clear to me that she had not read any of the books. Once again, the rabbit was seldom out of his cage. The teacher did bring in some greens, mostly iceberg lettuce. This time I swore I would not get involved. I had my own work to do. So I only visited when I was in that part of the building.

A month passed. One day a student came to my classroom door. He asked if I was the teacher who liked animals. I cautiously answered "Yes." He told me that the rabbit in his biology class wasn't eating. I asked more questions. He was in charge of feeding the rabbit, and he had noticed that the pellets were untouched, and the water level in the bottle had not gone down. When he told the teacher, she said she'd take care of it, but now three days had passed and the rabbit still wasn't eating or drinking. "Three days?!" I exclaimed. I promised this concerned student that I would be there to see the rabbit right after my next class. He smiled and said, "They told me you would do something." I don't know who "they" were, but apparently word had spread about me and my animals.

When I saw the rabbit, he looked awful. His skin had no elasticity, and his eyes were dull. I told the teacher that she had a very sick rabbit who required veterinary care immediately. The teacher replied that she could not afford the time or the money to take him to the hospital, and she didn't know of a vet anyway. She did not seem terribly upset about the rabbit's condition. I

asked if I could take him to my vet and offered to pay the bill. That was OK with her. I went directly from school to the vet's office.

He was a severely dehydrated bunny. Also, he was a she. My vet gave her fluids subcutaneously, and within an hour she looked much better.

When we got back to school, I told the biology teacher that the rabbit needed to be given medicine twice a day for two weeks. She replied that she couldn't see herself administering it. She was afraid the rabbit would scratch or bite her. So I kept the rabbit. She responded beautifully to care and has been with me and the rest of our animal family ever since. As soon as she was back in good health, I had her spayed. I also changed her name from Eddie to Edwina, and then to Winnie.

Of course, I also took home the guinea pig, whom the students thought was too stinky to have in their classroom. With pelleted paper litter, which I change frequently, he no longer has a smelly cage. He loves running round the house, sleeping under a footstool, and drinking from the dog's dish. (I have a very docile, unaggressive small dog, who licks the rabbits and guinea pig whenever they get within range of her tongue.)

> **So I am blessed with animal companions whom others considered throwaways. Good for me and, eventually, good for the rabbits and guinea pig. But good for the students? Did they learn anything positive about responsibility and caring?**

Yes, there were students who cared about Winnie's welfare; without their intervention, she would not be alive today. But what did the others learn? That animals are here for our use, that their needs are of little importance, and they can be discarded when they become inconvenient. That's why I think a rabbit in the classroom is not a good idea.

To safeguard the rabbits' physical and psychological well-being, and at the same time provide the children with a positive learning experience ***versus*** being used and who in most cases is disposed of when her usefulness ends. Doc and Winnie were two of the few lucky ones. Hopefully their story will inspire others to act as Carol McCall did.

Teachers sometimes like to enrich the classroom environment by having a classroom pet. In most situations, having a classroom pet is a disaster for the teacher, the students, and especially for the animal.

THE GOOD CLASSROOM SITUATION

The primary purpose of the classroom is to enhance learning, which is not always conducive to the welfare of animals. Children will always learn *something* from having an animal in the classroom. The question the teacher must address is what they want their students to learn, and whether they can make having an animal in the classroom a positive learning experience, whilst considering the welfare needs of the animal.

This requires the teacher (perhaps with the class participating) to:

- Learn about the animal and his or her needs before being introduced to the animal

- Determine whether a particular species of animal would be happy in the classroom environment, cat, dog, bird, rabbit guinea pig, fish, lizard etc
- Provide for the regular care of the animal.
- Provide the animal an annual check up with a veterinarian (the teacher might arrange for the students to visit the veterinarian while this is done).
- Understand and be able to recognize symptoms of illness in the animal.
- Provide veterinary care for the animal if s/he becomes ill (are funds available for this?)
- Have a single person/family responsible for the animal throughout his or her life (this is likely to be the teacher).
- Consider the alternative of a visit from an animal welfare or wildlife charity to present to the students or to bring the animals in for a controlled visit, or take the students on a site visit to an animal charity or wildlife organisation
- Many animal welfare organisations would be happy to support animal welfare learning in schools.

Approaching the question of animals in the classroom in this manner teaches children to treat all sentient creatures (including other humans) with respect. It teaches them at a deep level that sentient creatures are not toys that exist purely for the pleasure of the child, but that humans have a responsibility to an animal - to any life - that is dependent on them.

THE BAD CLASSROOM SITUATION

Unfortunately, animals are usually selected for the classroom in much the same manner toys or materials are selected. Some thought may be given to whether the children will find them enjoyable, but often little thought is given to the wellbeing of the animal. As a result, children learn:

- People need not concern themselves about the wellbeing of other sentient creatures (including humans), but only about their own desires.
- Caring for another life isn't important. At the deepest level, this encourages an attitude that life is cheap (including human life).
- If the animal is discarded at the end of the year (given to anyone who will take him or her, or taken to an animal shelter), children learn that people need not be responsible for their choices.
- They learn to dump their responsibilities on others.

RABBITS AS CLASSROOM PETS

Rabbits are "crepuscular," meaning they are most active in nature during dawn and dusk. Domesticated, they are most active morning and in the evening. Their deepest sleep occurs in the afternoon. This schedule may be ideal for many families, but obviously doesn't fit well in the classroom schedule. Not only do they need sleep when the class is likely to want to play with them, but the class has gone home when the rabbits want to be out playing and relating to people. Rabbits should never be left in the classroom overnight, miserable in their loneliness, when they most want to be out running and relating to people.

Some children may be allergic to rabbits or to their primary food, hay. If a child is allergic to the classroom rabbits, will you take them home for the year or dump them at a shelter (where they are likely to be killed)?

Will you show your students that you have a responsibility to the animal you brought into the classroom, or teach them that you consider it appropriate to dump your responsibilities onto others?

Rabbits must be neutered or spayed to avoid serious illness, unpleasant behaviour, and, babies. Thousands of rabbits are euthanized in shelters every year! **NEVER** bring more bunnies into the world, until all of those whose lives are in danger have homes.

An interesting maths lesson involves calculating how many rabbits can be born in a year if a pair has six babies per litter (actually smaller than usual), gives birth once a month, and the babies pair up and begin having babies of their own at 4 months of age.

Rabbits have a variety of special needs.

- Hay and water should always be available for rabbits. They should have fresh vegetables every day.
- Pellets are good for rabbits only when they are young and growing. In adulthood, pellets can cause serious health problems.
- In nature, rabbits bond for life. Without a mate, they are very lonely. They should always be neutered or spayed and paired with a compatible altered rabbit.

Rabbits and young children: Because rabbits stress easily, they are utterly inappropriate for young children who tend to be noisy with fast, jerky movements which frighten most rabbits. Rabbits are delicate animals, easily injured if not properly picked up. Children under eight years of age should never attempt to pick up a rabbit. Children over eight years of age should attempt it only if they have been taught how to do it properly. Rabbits can bite and scratch, inflicting serious wounds. They are likely to do this when frightened or when they believe they are in danger. A child who corners a rabbit or tries to pick one up without doing it properly may suffer such a wound.

Rabbits bond to one person or family, and are badly stressed by changes. Being prey animals, rabbits instinctively hide symptoms of illness which can result in rapid death if missed. Because of both these circumstances, rabbits should never be sent home with different people over weekends and holidays, but always be with their own people.

Rabbit caretakers must be aware of rabbit personality, characteristics, needs, and the symptoms of ill health in their rabbit. The best situation for rabbits in the classroom is when they belong to a teacher who takes full responsibility for them for life, takes them home every day, or brings them to school only on occasion.

If you would like further information or advice regarding rabbits in schools, please contact the Australian Chapter of the House Rabbit Society on 03 9751 1229.

This information was originally prepared by Carolyn Mixon and Gina Scherffius of the House Rabbit Resource Network in 2011. Reviewed by the Australian Chapter of the HRS in 2017