

Rabbits in the Classroom

Are you a teacher who's thinking about keeping a rabbit in your classroom? If so, here are some things to consider. First, ask yourself what you want your students to learn from the experience. If you want them to learn to treat all creatures responsibly, with respect and care, you'll want to ensure that you provide an appropriate example for the students. The experience should be positive not only for the students, but for the bunny as well.

So, before you get a rabbit, learn as much as you can about rabbits and their care. The House Rabbit Society website (www.rabbit.org) is a good source of information. Find out exactly what's involved in daily care of the bunny – not just what his basic needs are, but what will keep him happy. Think about the cost of keeping a rabbit; besides food and housing, you'll need to provide an annual checkup with a veterinarian, and there may be other veterinary costs if the rabbit gets sick.



The best situation for rabbits in the classroom is when they belong to a teacher or other adult who takes full responsibility for them for life – someone who takes them home every day or brings them to school only on occasion.

Here's some more basic information about the care and characteristics of rabbits:

- In order for them to obtain essential nutrients, rabbits need a varied diet – that means lots of different vegetables (not just carrots). Hay and water should always be available.
- In nature, rabbits bond for life. They are lonely without a mate, so you should consider getting a pair of rabbits.
- Rabbits must be spayed or neutered to prevent serious illness, unpleasant behavior and, of course, baby rabbits.
- As prey animals, rabbits instinctively hide symptoms of illness, which, if missed, can result in rapid death. You'll need to understand and be able to recognize signs of ill health.
- Because rabbits are easily stressed by loud, chaotic environments, they don't do well in classrooms with young children, who tend to be noisy and move quickly.
- Rabbits are delicate animals, easily injured if not picked up properly. Children less than eight years of age should not pick up a rabbit; those over eight should be taught how to do it correctly.
- Rabbits can bite and scratch when they are frightened or perceive that they are in danger. Children may be injured if they corner a rabbit or try to pick one up without doing it properly.

- Rabbits are most active at dawn and dusk. Bunnies need their sleep during the day (which is when students may want to play with them). After the class goes home, the rabbits will want to play and interact with people.
- You should be aware that some children may be allergic to rabbits. If this should happen in your classroom, ask yourself if you would be willing to take the rabbit home for the year.
- Rabbits are easily stressed by change. They should not be sent home with different families for weekends and holidays, but should always be with their own people, who will be alert to symptoms of ill health. And, rabbits should not be left alone in the classroom when school is out for the summer.

Approaching the question of animals in the classroom with thoughtfulness and care teaches children to treat all creatures (including other humans) with respect. It teaches them that they have a responsibility to any animal, to any life, that is dependent on them. If you show that you are doing all you can to keep your animals healthy and happy, your students will learn valuable lessons from you about respect and responsibility toward all life.

Note: The original article from the Colorado House Rabbit Society was condensed by Debby Widolf, Bunny House manager at Best Friends Animal Society.