

Rabbits and Other Animals

Rabbits can coexist with other animals in the family, even some dogs and cats. The personality and temperament of both animals will determine whether it is safe to leave the animals alone together. If you have a dog or cat and are interested in adding a rabbit to your family, many shelters and rescue groups can tell you whether a specific rabbit has been with dogs or cats before. It is often easier to introduce a rabbit who has already had a good experience with other species. In all cases, rabbits should be introduced to other animals — including other rabbits — slowly and with careful adult supervision.

Rabbits and Dogs

Before you consider trying to introduce your dog to the family rabbit, think carefully about his temperament and behavior. If he likes to hunt or chase rabbits and squirrels in your yard or if he barks any time someone moves, it is probably best to keep him away from the rabbit. If, however, he has a quiet, gentle demeanor he just might become best friends with your rabbit.

If you decide to try an introduction, be sure there is an adult present who is willing and able to step in at a moment's notice to protect the rabbit. Even better, have two adults present — one to be in charge of the rabbit and one to be in charge of the dog. Both adults should be completely focused on their animal — moods may change quickly and your rabbit could be seriously injured in a matter of seconds.

Watch the body language of both animals carefully. If the dog shows any signs of aggression, step in immediately to protect the rabbit and reevaluate the wisdom of proceeding. If there is true aggression from the dog you have a long road ahead of you and you may **never** be safe leaving the two together unsupervised. If your rabbit seems stressed by the meeting, it also may be wise to keep the two animals permanently separated.

You should also carefully watch your rabbit's demeanor during these interactions. If your rabbit has his ears back or tail up, this is an indication **he** is poised to attack. Do not assume that a five-pound rabbit will not try to attack your 90-pound dog! If your rabbit is poised to attack, firmly tell him, "No, be nice!" At the same time place a hand firmly on him to stop the attack. Carefully evaluate your dog's reaction. Some dogs who would never think of attacking a rabbit **will** attack if provoked. Others will simply ignore the rabbit. If an attack seems likely, remove the rabbit immediately.

Even if the initial meeting goes well, keep it short and plan to have several carefully supervised sessions before proceeding to the next step. If, after several short sessions all seems well, allow the two animals to spend longer times together with an adult present. At this point the adult need not be completely focused on the animals, but should be in a position to step in immediately if necessary. Only after many supervised sessions with no aggression should you consider allowing your rabbit and your dog to be together without adult supervision.

If your rabbit and dog are able to coexist peacefully and share their living space, you will still have some challenges. Rabbits should not be allowed to eat dog food — but don't assume your rabbit won't try, especially if he bonds with your dog. Similarly, some dogs experience GI upset, including diarrhea and vomiting if they eat your rabbit's salad. Watch both animals closely and make whatever adjustments to "togetherness" are needed to address each unique situation.

Rabbits and Cats

Before you consider trying to introduce your cat to the family rabbit, think carefully about the temperament and behavior of **both** animals. If your cat chases wild bunnies and mice or if he stalks birds, he may attack the family rabbit. At the other end of the spectrum are cats who are intimidated by Blue Jays (I had one of these as a child). I have heard several stories from people whose rabbit terrorized the family cat!

The technique for introducing cats and rabbits is almost identical to the technique described above for introducing dogs and rabbits. The key elements are: close supervision, careful monitoring of the reactions of both animals, and separation at the first sign of aggression from either animal. Proceed slowly and cautiously. Leaving your rabbit and cat unsupervised too soon can lead to serious injury to one or both animals.

If your rabbit and cat bond, you have even more challenges than with dogs. Rabbits should never be allowed to eat cat food. Rabbits and cats who share the same space should each have their own litter-box, even though it may be impossible to completely control who uses which box. Be sure to use rabbit-safe (non-clumping) litter in any litter-box your rabbit can get to.

Rabbits and Other Animals

Many people who have rabbits also have other small mammals — guinea pigs, rats, mice, hamsters, gerbils, chinchillas to name a few. In most cases it is best to house these animals separately, but they can still benefit greatly from the companionship of being near each other. The day before we said goodbye to Choca Paws he spent the day at the vet's office. Because of his critical condition, Dr. Bradley offered to take him home for the night so she could give him round-the-clock care. After he was gone Dr. Bradley told me that he had spent the night in her spare room with her guinea pig Pudgers. She told me that Pudgers was normally fairly quiet but that he had chattered at Choca Paws all night long. It was comforting to me to know that he had not only had the best medical care possible, but also companionship, during his final night.