

## Rabbits and Children

Rabbits are not the best choice as a pet for **most** children. They require at least as much care as a cat or dog. In addition, they need a caretaker who is deeply “in tune” with their physical and mental health and can pick up **subtle** changes in behavior that may be early signs of a medical problem. This is difficult for many adults and is way too much to expect from a small child. Occasionally there is a child with an exceptional ability to communicate with animals. If you have such a child, nurture that ability. He may be a tremendous help if your family decides to adopt a rabbit.

An adult should supervise all interactions between small children and the family rabbit. Rabbits have small, fragile bones. A child cannot play roughly with a rabbit as he would with a dog. A rabbit must be held firmly enough that he does not escape, yet gently enough to not injure him. This can be difficult for adults as well as children, and there is little margin for error. A rabbit who is held either too tightly or too loosely may struggle to get free, injuring himself and the child in the process.

Most adult rabbits do not like to be picked up, carried, chased after, or grabbed. Loud voices and quick, sudden movements — normal childhood behaviors — can be intimidating to rabbits. Depending on the rabbit’s personality, he may respond to a hand thrust into his cage by cowering in the corner or by lunging at (and possibly nipping) the child. Such behavior is often misinterpreted as the sign of a mean or aggressive rabbit when, in fact, it is simply a rabbit acting in self-defense.

Children need to be taught to interact with a rabbit by sitting quietly on the floor and waiting for the rabbit to approach them. This requires more patience than many children have. Often, a child loses interest in a rabbit when he learns this is the way he must play with his pet. This is one reason it is so important for a rabbit to be a family pet rather than a child’s pet.

Shrill voices and high-pitched noises have been known to cause a rabbit to attack. When I was a young child, the rabbit who shared our home attacked and bit me when I was blowing a toy harmonica. We did not realize what the problem was until the next time I played the harmonica in his presence and he turned on us. My mother and I jumped to safety on the kitchen cabinet and he quickly settled down. I never played the harmonica in the house again and he never attacked again.

