



BUNNIES + CLASSROOMS = *MISMATCH!*

The following article was written because of Kali, the rabbit who inspired this book. She was born in a preschool classroom, removed too young from her mother, put alone into a cage in a different classroom, and then not given proper care. It is my hope that this article will educate parents and teachers and will prevent such misfortune from befalling another hapless bunny.

The classroom is abuzz with afternoon activity. In one corner, a small group of children reads aloud the simple stories they've written. Across the room, another cluster claps out the rhythms to a poem. A quartet chants the addition tables. Two youngsters push bits of crackers into the cage of the classroom bunny. Through the open window comes the sound of a whistle, starting the gym relay.

From the bunny's perspective, what's wrong with this picture?

Just about everything!

"Mismatch" means *to match unsuitably or inaccurately*, and classrooms (including preschool rooms) happen to be very unsuitable "homes" for rabbits. *Why?* A few facts may help explain.

- Rabbits have been domesticated for a relatively short period of time, and they retain many of the instincts of the European wild rabbits from whom they descended. For example, they instinctively seek shelter and sleep during the day to avoid predators and midday heat (even when safety and high temperatures are not a concern), and they innately dig and chew.
- Rabbits are prey animals. Dogs and cats, the companion animals with whom most of us are familiar, are predators. If traits and behaviors of dogs and cats are projected onto rabbits, misunderstandings and misconceptions about rabbits and their behaviors result.

- Rabbits are culturally viewed as sweet, cuddly, gentle pets. Although this is certainly part of their nature, in other respects they are quite the opposite: independent and strong-willed, feisty and territorial, and sometimes aggressive or grouchy (especially if not neutered or spayed).
- Rabbits' chewing behavior, which some people view solely as destructive, is spurred by physiology. Their teeth, which grow continuously throughout life, are made for chewing fibrous, coarse, and abrasive plant materials, such as grass hay. The action of the teeth grinding together as tough plant materials are consumed helps maintain the proper length and shape of the teeth. Both proper diet and veterinary care are critical for preventing the health issues that can result from tooth overgrowth.

Here are some of the ways in which the needs of rabbits and the needs of children diverge, creating a definite mismatch.

- Rabbits are crepuscular, a zoological reference to being naturally active before sunrise and at twilight.
Children (and most teachers) are generally out of the classroom during those times, depriving the resident bunny of the opportunities to interact socially and to exercise outside the cage during his normal active time.
- Rabbits instinctively take a deep nap during the middle of the day and are easily stressed by noise and commotion when they need to sleep.
Healthy, happy kids are active and boisterous and are often allowed to interact with the rabbit during the bunny's natural quiet time.
- Rabbits need a safe, open exercise space.
Most classrooms are not bunny-proofed, which can result in damage to the room—and injury or death to the rabbit. Desks, tables, cabinets, and bookcases allow only minimal exercise space and pose potential safety concerns for a free-roaming rabbit. In addition, the bunny can be accidentally sat on, kicked, or stepped on as adults and children move about the room.
- Rabbits, as prey animals, instinctively seek their safe place and are often territorial about their home.
Children want to show their love and attention by trying to pet the bunny and often stick their finger,

pencil, or other object through the wire sides of the cage. Such actions are very stressful and unsafe for a rabbit—and unsafe for the children, as a rabbit may lunge and bite as a means of defense.

- Rabbits need a regular routine and predictable surroundings.
Children proudly take the bunny home for a weekend, not realizing how frightening the strange noises, odors, activities, other household animals, and unfamiliar routines are to a rabbit. Separating two rabbits who live together in the classroom and sending each one home to a different family creates incredible stress for the bunnies. However, leaving a rabbit alone in the classroom for a weekend or holiday puts the rabbit in jeopardy, since these delicate creatures must be cared for and monitored on a daily basis.
- Rabbits instinctively hide symptoms of illness or injury.
It's easy for a busy teacher or classroom aide to miss the subtle, but critical, signs of illness in a rabbit. Sending a bunny home with students for weekends, holidays, or vacation can result in symptoms of serious illness being overlooked or ignored. If there are other pets in the home, the rabbit may be exposed to certain trans-species illnesses.
- Rabbits are considered “exotics” in veterinary terminology, and they need regular check-ups by vets who know rabbits well.
It's incumbent upon the teacher to obtain proper medical care for a classroom rabbit. School district funds aren't generally allocated for animal care, which places the financial burden on the teacher. If the rabbit's health needs are not met, children may inadvertently learn that it's okay to have animals even if one can't properly care for them.
- Rabbits have fragile bodies and must be handled carefully.
Youngsters are very eager, do not know their own strength, and often don't respect a rabbit's needs. A child tends to grab and hold a bunny improperly and too tightly.
- Rabbits have delicate, complex digestive systems and may become ill, and even die, from eating the wrong foods.
Children are frequently allowed to feed bunnies foods that the teacher may not realize are inappropriate. In an attempt to be “friends,” a child might sneak forbidden/toxic foods or too many treats to the rabbit.

- Rabbits require a quality high-fiber diet, and grass hay should be available at all times. Pellets and/or specific fresh vegetables are daily necessities, based on the bunny's age, weight, and health.
 - Hay creates a mess, poses storage problems, and may trigger allergies in some children and adults.
 - Fresh vegetables require refrigeration. Inappropriate vegetables—or any vegetables fed to a very young rabbit—can cause illness or death.
- Rabbits groom their fur regularly, although some breeds, especially those with long hair, need assistance.
 - Proper grooming of a long-haired rabbit is time-consuming and should occur daily when the rabbit is shedding and at least weekly during the rest of the year. Children and adults may have allergic reactions to rabbit fur.
- Rabbits are intelligent, inquisitive, social beings who need stimulation, freedom, and lots of interaction during their active time.
 - Most teachers' main focus is, understandably, on the students—not on keeping a classroom rabbit challenged and stimulated. No one may notice that the isolated bunny is lonely and depressed.

Before bringing a rabbit (or guinea pig, hamster, or other animal) into the classroom, a teacher should honestly ask him- or herself: Why do I want a bunny in the classroom? What exactly am I using him to teach?

It may be that the teacher wishes to model responsible behavior or to provide an experience for children who, for various reasons, don't have a companion animal at home. Or perhaps the instructor wants students to research rabbits, then apply that learning to other topics. Sometimes the true answer may be that the rabbit isn't really for teaching purposes, but rather for entertainment or novelty in the classroom.

In all cases, there is a need for a sincere answer to an additional question: Can I ensure that *all* the needs of the rabbit—a high maintenance pet—will be properly met? In most situations, the answer will be “no” and alternative teaching solutions should be found.

There is another pivotal issue that concerns the welfare of rabbits (and other classroom pets) at the end of a semester or school year. Often the classroom bunny is joyously passed along to a student's family, who may know nothing about the care or needs of a rabbit. If the situation doesn't work out, the well-meaning family may hope the bunny finds a new home through the local animal shelter or may even harbor the common misconception that domesticated rabbits can survive in the wild. Animal rescue organizations receive calls during the school year regarding classroom bunnies needing a home.

Therefore, a teacher should also address the following: If the rabbit has to be relinquished for *any* reason, what will happen to him? For example, what will happen to the bunny at the end of the semester or school year or if I should happen to leave my teaching position? What if someone in the classroom is allergic to the bunny's fur or to the hay? What will I do if a student is not gentle enough to be safely near the bunny or if the frightened rabbit bites a child? Am I willing to give the bunny a permanent, loving home to ensure he doesn't end up an unwanted rabbit, consigned to a hutch, taken to a shelter (where he may be euthanized), or released into the wild (where he will die unless rescued)?

Bunnies and classrooms are a serious mismatch because the nature and requirements of a rabbit and the realities and needs of students are fundamentally incompatible. In contrast, a rabbit will thrive in a home that honors her needs for affection, health, safety, and free expression of her multifaceted nature.

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“The Rabbit Round-Up” is based on an original story by Caroline Gilbert that appeared in The Fund for Animals “Rabbit Sanctuary Newsletter.” It was rewritten with her permission. Versions of two written pieces first appeared in issues of Joyce Leake’s online-magazine, “Living with Animals: Stories of People and Animals”—“Love Your Rabbit: The Basics of Rabbit Care” (June 2002) and “Lobo and Blueberry” (October 2002).

The photos and illustrations depict the actual rabbits in the stories, with the exception of the New Zealand white in “The Rabbit Round-Up” and the photos used in “The Great Rabbit Rescue.” The latter photos are from the second of the great rabbit rescues in which Best Friends Animal Society has been involved.

“Jingle Bells,” J. Pierpont, 1857.

“We Wish You a Merry Christmas,” composer unknown, traditional.

“If wishes were horses,” traditional proverb and rhyme.

Mead, Marie.

Rabbits : gentle hearts, valiant spirits :
inspirational stories of rescue, triumph, and joy /
Marie Mead ; with Nancy LaRoche ; foreword by Michael W.
Fox.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

LCCN 2006932196

ISBN-13: 978-0-9786226-0-2

ISBN-10: 0-9786226-0-X

1. Rabbits. 2. Human-animal relationships.
3. Animal welfare. I. LaRoche, Nancy, 1941- II. Title.

SF453.M378 2007

636.932'2

QBI06-600326

Design by Rudy J. Ramos

Cover photographs by Velly Oliver

Printed in China