



Rabbits and Guinea Pigs in Educational Settings



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Here at SPCA we get quite few enquiries from ECE centres, primary schools, and parents, about keeping rabbits and guinea pigs as centre or classroom pets.

Why we don't recommend rabbits and guinea pigs as classroom or centre pets

Many people, particularly teachers and parents of young children, think keeping a rabbit or a guinea pig as a pet is less of a commitment and easier than a dog or cat, but this is simply not true. Unfortunately, rabbits and guinea pigs are often seen as a low-maintenance pet or teaching tool. But what do such practices really teach children about the value of these animals' lives - when children are observing these animals caged, often alone and unable to express any of their natural behaviours?

This is not to say that rabbits and guinea pigs don't make wonderful companion animals!

Rabbits and guinea pigs are sensitive, intelligent and social animals who can make wonderful additions to people's lives. However, it is essential that people thoroughly research and understand the needs of these animals and ensure they are in the position to meet all of their needs. Here's what you need to know before adopting rabbits or guinea pigs:

Rabbits and guinea pigs are different species with different needs

Sometimes centres put a rabbit and a guinea pig together thinking they will keep each other company, however this very rarely works and SPCA recommends strongly against it. They might both be classed as 'small animals' but for multiple reasons, they should not be housed together. Firstly, they have different diets. While both herbivores, the nutrients they require from their food is quite different and feeding the wrong diet can result in medical conditions, such as scurvy. For this reason, rabbit and guinea pig food pellets are formulated specially for their species only. Rabbits also eat much more than guinea pigs, so may hog all the food!

Secondly, the size difference. Rabbits are much bigger than guinea pigs, and while they might not do it intentionally, a rabbit's hind leg kick can seriously injure a guinea. Rabbits love to hop and run and a guinea pig could quite easily get in the way!

Furthermore, housing rabbits and guinea pigs together puts your guinea pig at risk of disease. Rabbits may bully guinea pigs, which can make them stressed and vulnerable to disease. Additionally, rabbits can carry bacteria, *Bordetellabronchiseptica*, which is the most common cause of respiratory disease in guinea pigs.

Finally, rabbits and guinea pigs need a companion from their own species that behaves in the same way, enabling them to play, groom and snuggle and of course – speak the same language with.

Note: [If your school or centre's rabbit and guinea pig are already bonded, please don't separate them. Talk to one of the small animal team at your local SPCA about the possibility of adopting a second rabbit and guinea pig, then gradually introducing, separating, and transitioning them into separate, neighbouring enclosures, with their new companion of the same species.](#)

Rabbits and guinea pigs need a lot of space and shouldn't be kept in a cage

Just as you wouldn't keep a dog or cat confined in a small enclosure, neither rabbits nor guinea pigs should be kept confined in a cage or hutch. Rabbits in particular are highly inquisitive and need a lot of enrichment to keep their minds occupied. They also need access to different levels, a lot of safe space to run and exercise (like a secured yard) and toys to play with and chew on. Classrooms or centres rarely have the space available to meet this need.

Rabbits and guinea pigs are not ideal for small children

Rabbits and guinea pigs very rarely make an ideal "first pet" for small children. Very young children generally find it difficult to stay quiet, calm and gentle around animals. Children's innate exuberance, decibel-level and spontaneity is therefore extremely stressful for most rabbits and guinea pigs, who as prey animals are instinctively alert, timid creatures that scare easily.

Most children are naturally very loving and very tactile and "loving" to a small child often means holding, cuddling and carrying an animal around. However, rabbits and guinea pigs are ground dwelling prey species. Rather than a sign of affection, to them, being picked up is a sign of capture and attack - in the wild the only time they would be picked up would be if they were caught by a predator. Pet rabbits and guinea pigs can find being picked up just as alarming, because the fear of being caught and lifted is hardwired into their genes!

When stressed, most rabbits will scratch, kick or bite until they are put back down, guinea pigs are likely to vocalise their stress, with squeaks and squeals. A child's natural reaction when holding a struggling animal is to squeeze him or her more tightly or to drop them. Guinea pigs have a sensitive abdomen – which is very easy to over squeeze, and cause internal organ damage. A struggling rabbit can be accidentally dropped, squeezed too tightly by children, or jump trying to escape from children's arms - resulting in broken legs and backs.

Building a positive relationship with a rabbit or guinea pig can definitely be done, but it takes a lot of time and patience. Many rabbits can become accustomed to regular, gentle handling and can actually learn to love human contact with all four feet on the floor. Some rabbits can even fall asleep having their nose and cheeks gently rubbed. However, majority of rabbits are never able to be held without showing signs of fear and distress. Unfortunately, many people are not aware of rabbits' body language and ignore these signs of fear and distress that are being communicated. For these reasons, many children, especially young children, will find it difficult to interact with a rabbit and soon lose interest.

Rabbits and guinea pigs get stressed easily with handling

Correct handling of rabbits is vital, as they have a fragile spine and if they feel insecure and struggle they can sustain serious, potentially fatal injuries such as fractures. Because rabbits feel frightened when people pick them up, they kick and struggle which means children can also get hurt. Rabbits are also built to react to sudden changes which means they may either run away or try to bite when approached too quickly and too loudly.

When you do pick up a rabbit, they need to feel safe and secure. Start by putting one hand under their chest, with a couple of your fingers between their front legs, the other two around the outside of one leg and your thumb around the outside of the other. With your other hand scoop up their bottom. Get them very close to your body as quickly as you can so that they're secure and cannot wriggle nor leap out of your grip. Don't squeeze. Rabbits are very fragile, with fine bones that snap easily and internal organs that can easily be damaged. You need to be firm without squeezing. When putting your rabbit back on the ground, you need to be careful that they don't make a jump for freedom. Keep them as close to your body as you can, bend your knees and squat down, and lower your rabbit to the ground still in your secure grip.

Like rabbits, guinea pigs can also feel very frightened when picked up and held. It is really important to establish a gentle, positive relationship with your guinea pigs. This is rewarding for you both, but also makes health checks and grooming much less stressful for them. Handling guinea pigs gently every day from an early age and being relaxed and calm around them can help them learn to feel safe and enjoy your company. Young guinea pigs are likely to be nervous when you first take them home so you shouldn't handle them initially.

During the first few days simply talk quietly to your guinea pigs. Encourage them to approach you by offering healthy treats. You can then start to gently stroke them and when they become more comfortable and confident with this, you can gradually get them used to being picked up. Using both hands, place one hand under your guinea pig's chest so their front legs are either side of your fingers and use your other hand to support their back and rear. Once picked up, you should hold them close into your body and support them from

underneath. Once they get to know you they'll enjoy spending time with you, but remember - not all guinea pigs like being picked up and held. If your guinea pigs are frightened or are not relaxed and happy, interactions are better and safer at ground level.

They usually need special veterinarians

Another common misconception is that rabbits and guinea pigs are easy to care for, but rabbit and guinea pig parents will tell you that they're just as big a responsibility as cats and dogs — maybe even bigger!

Rabbits and guinea pigs are considered “exotic” pets, and a lot of regular vets aren't familiar with treating them, so you'll need to find a local veterinarian who is. As mentioned before, rabbits and guinea pigs are quite fragile and succumb quickly to illness and disease. If you were to notice your rabbit or guinea pig isn't eating any food, you would need to take him/her to the vet immediately.

Remember, you can't just leave a rabbit or guinea pig alone in an enclosure in corner of your classroom or middle of your centre playground. If you notice any signs of illness, you need to call your veterinarian.

Already have a centre or classroom rabbit or guinea pig? Here are some tips to help ensure their needs are being met:

They are very social

Rabbits and guinea pigs are highly social creatures – this means that they need company, and that company should be from their own species. No matter how hard we try, we can't give our pet rabbits as much company as another rabbit can. ECE centres and primary school classrooms are busy places and even if you make sure you spend 3 or 4 hours a day with your rabbits or guinea pigs, that means that they spend 20 hours or more without you.

Rabbits and guinea pigs get lonely and need plenty of social interaction. Considering getting two desexed rabbits or two desexed guinea pigs instead of one, so they can keep each other company. They'll play together, groom each other and snuggle up together to sleep. It is, however, vital that rabbits are slowly introduced to one another as rabbits can be aggressive to each other if they must share a home right away. We recommend you talk to one of the small animal team at your local SPCA about how to effectively bond rabbits.

There are a lot of rescue rabbits and guinea pigs in New Zealand waiting for a forever home

Sadly, because of all the misconceptions that exist around keeping rabbits and guinea pigs as pets (whether at home, at an ECE centre or school), there are plenty of abandoned rabbits and guinea pigs who need new responsible forever homes. Please consider rescuing a pair of rabbits or guinea pigs instead of buying one from a pet shop, a breeder, or online.

There are MANY more things to learn about caring for rabbits and guinea pigs. Our [Kids' Portal](#) is a great place to start learning how to be the best rabbit guardian you can be. When done properly, it's an amazing and rewarding journey for families with older children.

Useful questions to ask yourself before getting a classroom rabbit or guinea pig – adapted from the House Rabbit Society checklist <https://rabbit.org/faq-classroom-rabbits/>

- > Are you committed to caring for two rabbits or guinea pigs for 8-12 years?
- > Are you fully committed to giving these animals consistent, on-schedule, care? Because of the way these animals' digestion works, food, hay, and water must be available at all times. Enclosures and litterboxes should be cleaned daily of soiled matter and must be thoroughly scrubbed weekly.
- > How will you ensure that they receive proper care when you are not around? Companion animals need consistent care, including on weekends and during holidays. Sending classroom rabbits or guinea pigs home with a student or a succession of students can result in severe stress to the animals. Improper care is likely, even in the most well-intentioned homes – as they are not properly set up to accommodate a rabbit or guinea pig. Animals should not be left alone over weekends. Even leaving animals alone over night at a school or a centre has its risks.
- > Are you willing to monitor your animals closely for illness? These animals 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.
- > If your rabbit or guinea pig is sick, can your centre afford to have them treated? If you make a vet visit and medication or other care is prescribed, are you prepared to be able to give it during teaching and outside of teaching hours?
- > Do you have space for a large enclosure and free range space, both at your centre/school and at home?
- > What would happen if the air conditioning or heat at your school or centre is turned off outside of school hours, or if pesticides are sprayed? Rabbits, because of their thick coats, begin to show distress at high temperatures. Rabbits are so sensitive to pesticides that even common flea preparations are likely to cause serious illness.

- > Are your learners mature enough to understand the lessons you want them to learn from the animal(s) and are they capable of treating the animal(s) appropriately? Children under 7 are usually not mature enough to safely interact with a rabbit or guinea pig except under close, constant, supervision.
- > Do you have the time to teach students proper behaviour and to monitor their interaction with the animal(s)? Adults must be committed to teaching and enforcing rules that protect both the child and the rabbit from physical and emotional trauma.
- > 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 if they try to escape being held.
- > Are you willing to “rabbit-proof” your classroom so you can allow the rabbit the out-of-cage time necessary for their well-being? Rabbits like to dig, and chew just about everything (including cords and wires!), but their destructiveness can be managed by managing their environment, training, and other methods. Rabbits should get at least three hours of exercise daily.
- > Are you willing to groom your rabbit like he or she needs to stay healthy? This includes trimming nails, brushing (especially for angoras), cleaning scent glands and more.
- > Is your centre or classroom environment comfortable for a naturally timid animal? Stresses present in classrooms include noise, over-handling, improper foods and diet variations, disruption of routine, temperature changes, and species loneliness.
- > Does your principal or centre manager approve of uncaged pets? If not, are you willing to take the rabbit home daily for free-range time?
- > Will you be prepared to take the rabbits home and keep them there if a student is allergic to them?

