

First Few Weeks in a New Home

Adapted from an article by Amy Espie

During these early days your friend may not "be himself". During this difficult period, the two most important contributions you can make are: set up a friendly, safe environment; and let him set the pace for getting acquainted.

When you first bring home a rabbit, one of the most useful tools for helping him to feel at ease is your imagination. How do you and your household look to him?

When adding a rabbit to our family, we may be ready right away to give and receive generous amounts of love and affection. Maybe that's because we're not the ones who have just arrived in a strange place, populated by foreigners who don't speak our language.

Imagine how you would feel if the size difference between you were reversed: a giant hand reaches down and plucks you from your home. It sets you down on a planet of 2-ton, 30-foot-tall beings--a sort of giraffe/elephant hybrid. How long before you'd feel relaxed? What would be your instinctive reaction when one of these giants came lumbering over? Is that a smile on the enormous creature's face, or a grimace? Only time (plus the occasional raisin or banana slice) will tell your new companion that he's among friends.

While you are observing and learning about him, bear in mind that during these early days he may not "be himself." He may be too scared to show you how affectionate he's going to be once he recovers from the shock of relocation. He may have too much on his mind to be perfectly box-trained - in a few weeks, when he's feeling more at home, he may need a remedial course in Litterbox101.

Your rabbit may be feeling so insecure that territorial marking is almost an obsession (if he/she's not neutered/ spayed, do it now!). He may be too scared to let you hold or touch him; or he may be too scared to tell you he doesn't like to be held. He may seem extraordinarily loving and affectionate, leaving you confused when this hormone-driven behavior decreases in the weeks following spay/neuter. Or he may be one of those rare mellow, confident individuals whose new family needs none of the following suggestions.

During this difficult period, the two most important contributions you can make are: set up a friendly, safe environment; and let him set the pace for getting acquainted.

Home Base

Set up a small area or roomy cage (or both). Use a laundry room, bathroom, hallway blocked off with baby gates, or part of a larger room sectioned off using furniture, boxes, or other objects he can't scale or knock over. Choose a spot that gets some regular, not-too-noisy traffic, where he can see and hear but not be trampled by your daily routines. Start housetraining by providing at least one or two litterboxes. A fresh layer of grass hay on top will both encourage and reward him for hopping in.

If you know what brand of pellets he was eating, keep him on it for a while to minimize risk of digestive upset (unless it was bunny junk-food that contained corn, seeds, and other unhealthy additions). Fresh water in a bowl or bottle, or both, should be available at all times. Give him at least one cardboard box with two bunny-size doors cut, and a towel draped across one area of his cage, as hiding places.

Start him on the road to good chewing habits by removing forbidden and dangerous temptations such as house plants, electric cords, and books. Provide permitted alternatives such as untreated straw, wicker, or sea-grass baskets and mats (available at import stores such as Pier 1), cardboard tubes and boxes, plastic baby-toys for tossing, fruit-tree branches, and plenty of fresh hay.

Great Expectations, and what to do about them

As with good houstraining habits, building a friendship may take time and patience. If he's not ready to be petted yet, caress him with your voice. Talk to him, or to anyone while in his presence. Many rabbits seem to enjoy listening to their humans talk on the phone. Hang out with him in rabbit fashion, by sitting quietly on the floor.

Show him that he can hop over to you, take a few get-acquainted sniffs and gentle nibbles, and then hop away again. This hands-off approach paves the way to a hands-on friendship, especially with shy or traumatized rabbits. As her fear diminishes, her curiosity increases. Place a small treat or two (a sprig of parsley or carrot-top, a sliver of apple) and a few toys on the floor next to you, to make his visit even more rewarding.

If no other humans are around, you might want to say your first few words in Rabbit. Tell your new friend how happy, content, calm, and delighted you feel in his company. You may not be able, as he is, to "comb" your long silky ears between your hands--but you can pretend to wash your face the way he does, using hands and tongue. When he responds by grooming himself, it means you're way cool, practically an Honorary Rabbit.

Don't be discouraged if your bunny doesn't warm up right away. Patience is definitely a virtue in making friends with your new bunny!