



Bunny Buddies

DEDICATED TO THE HEALTH AND WELFARE OF HOUSTON-AREA RABBITS

HOUSE RABBIT FOSTERING HANDBOOK

We're very glad you're thinking about fostering house rabbits. Our foster network is the foundation of our rescue efforts, and we are always in need of more foster homes. Fostering can be extremely rewarding and satisfying. Most of our foster parents are amazed at the infinite variety of rabbit personalities and feel privileged to get to know each bunny who comes into their home. This handbook is intended to be a resource for making your fostering experience successful and less stressful. We realize there are a lot of "do's" and "don'ts," but these guidelines help us ensure that all of our furry friends are well cared for and prepared to move comfortably to their "forever" homes when the time is right.

How do I become a fosterer for Bunny Buddies?

First, you must meet the following requirements:

1. You must have experience caring for house rabbits.
2. You must be a member of Bunny Buddies.
3. You must have read and understood the Rabbit Care Guide and the House Rabbit Fostering Handbook.
4. Any personal rabbits in your home must be spayed or neutered.
5. You must make a commitment to fostering for the long-term, as we need to be able to count on our foster homes. Most fosters are with their foster families for a couple of months at the very least.
6. You must be able to house and exercise your foster rabbit indoors and separated from your personal rabbits.
7. You must be able to bring your foster rabbit to monthly adoption days, or make arrangements to get someone to bring him/her if you can't make it.
8. You must be able to provide your foster rabbit at least 2 hours a day out of his/her cage. The exercise time required may vary depending upon the amount of play space constantly available, but remember that socialization time with you is also important.
9. You must understand that all fostering decisions are made by the Chair of the Fostering Committee and the Board of Directors.
10. You must be willing to allow occasional site visits by a member of the Fostering Committee.
11. You must have email/Internet access and be a member of the BB Yahoo discussion group; this the main way we keep in touch with each other.
12. You must be willing to keep your foster bunny's records current in our Internet-based database "I-Shelters."

Next, you must submit a fostering application online:

<http://ws.ishelters.com/application.php?k=fgvbt&t=Foster>

(or click on the link from the fostering section of our website, www.bunnybuddies.org).

Once your application has been approved, you will be asked to sign a "Foster Contract" for each bunny entering your care.

OK, I've been approved to foster. How do I prepare for my foster bunny's arrival?

You will need to set up your cage/exercise area in a part of your home separate from your permanent bunnies. This is important for several reasons.

First, we don't usually have a lot of information about the history of the bunnies entering our foster care. They may come to us with parasites and/or diseases. This makes a "quarantine" situation vital to the well being of your own bunnies.

Also, your permanent bunnies will feel a sense of ownership of their space. This natural territorial tendency can lead to some pretty intense—possibly even fatal—fighting.

Finally, it's not a good idea for your foster bunnies to socially "bond" with your permanent bunnies. This creates profound stress on the bunnies when your foster leaves your home for his/her "forever" home.

What are the guidelines for daily care of my foster bunny?

These fostering guidelines represent the minimum standards of care which are expected of a Bunny Buddies fosterer. Our adopters must be able to confidently expect that the bunny they are adopting has received proper diet, health care, and socialization.

Diet

Hay: You must provide as much timothy hay as the rabbit will eat. If your new foster won't eat hay, it's probably because he/she never had it before. Work at it. It's very important for health in the long run.

Fresh Vegetables: A salad with at least 3 green vegetables (romaine, parsley, and cilantro, for example) must be provided every day; a larger variety is highly recommended.

Pellets: Many experienced rabbit vets now feel that pellets are overfed to our pet rabbits. Pellets were developed by rabbit meat breeders to put weight on fast for market. They do have some vitamins and minerals (and the bunnies love 'em!). Pellets should only be fed in limited quantities: 1/4 cup per 5 lbs of rabbit *TOTAL* per day. For rabbits under 6 months of age, feed them as much as they want (unless they are getting fat, of course!). Please feed a good quality pellet; no pellets with seeds, corn, colored bits, etc. mixed in should be used. These are VERY high in fat and generally unhealthy for rabbits, no matter what the manufacturer wants you to believe. Look for a pellet that is low in fat (2% or less is great) and high in fiber (18% or more is great). Some good brands are Oxbow, Harlan, Purina in the Green Bag, and Manna Pro Double Duty. Adult rabbits should eat a timothy-based pellet (not alfalfa), while an infant can start with an alfalfa-based pellet and be weaned to timothy-based at about six months of age.

Treats: Please keep treats to a minimum. Rabbits love fruit like apple (without seeds or stems) as a treat. Avoid commercially available "rabbit treats;" although they are marketed for rabbits by pet food companies, they are usually made with ingredients which are actually very unhealthy for rabbits.

Housing

If a cage is used (usually recommended), it must be of adequate size. This will vary depending on the bunny. A rule of thumb is whether the rabbit can completely flop out and still have room for a litterbox and some toys. A litterbox **MUST** be provided inside the cage. A bunny-safe litter must be used. NO pine or cedar shavings or clay cat litter (clay litter is very dusty and often causes weepy eyes and respiratory problems). Carefresh, Yesterday's News, Cat Country, and Woody Pet are a few litters which are bunny safe. The size of the cage necessary is also somewhat determined by how much time OUT of the cage you are able to provide over the requisite 2 hours a day. If you have a small cage, but the door is always open, that is fine.

Cages, exercise pens, and baby gates will be provided by Bunny Buddies when available.

NOTE: most commercially-available “rabbit cages” are expensive and woefully inadequate for proper housing. See our Rabbit Care Guide for suggestions and examples of how you can easily and inexpensively create your own “bunny condo.”

Exercise

All Bunny Buddies foster rabbits MUST be allowed OUT of a cage at least 2 hours each day. You are expected to bunnyproof if necessary to provide this kind of exercise and freedom. An appropriate running area would be 3x8 feet. We want our rabbits to have room to DANCE!

Supplies

Fosterers are expected to provide their own litter boxes, water bottles and/or bowls, hay dispensers, and bunny-safe litter. Cages, litterboxes, waterbottles, nail trimmers, toys, etc. are occasionally donated; we will gladly provide these to our fosterers when they are available.

How many bunnies may I foster?

Every bunny in our foster system is considered an organizational “liability.” That is, if anything were to happen to any of our fosterers, the organization would be responsible for finding a new space in which to provide ongoing care for that fosterer’s bunnies. To help manage the scope of that liability (and to ensure an appropriate level of care in each of our foster homes), the board has set the following limits on numbers:

1. A fosterer who is new to Bunny Buddies’ fostering program is limited to one foster or one bonded pair of fosters for the first six months of participation, with a maximum of six bunnies in the home—including your permanent bunnies.
2. After six months of successful participation in the fostering program, a fosterer is limited to four fosters, with a maximum of eight rabbits in the home—including your permanent bunnies.
3. Exceptions to this limit include: a) 1-2 day stays for transportation and/or spay/neuter surgery recovery, and b) exceptions granted by a majority vote of the Board of Directors when deemed appropriate.

I understand that my foster bunnies must be kept separate from my personal bunnies. Can I house my fosters together?

In general, no—unless the bunnies come to us already bonded. New additions to your foster family should be quarantined from all other bunnies in the home for at least two weeks. After that period, multiple fosters may be housed in the same area of your home, but precaution should be taken to keep them from being able to fight with one another. They should not share a cage divider through which they may fight; they should not play together, nor should they be able to reach the other bunnies during exercise/play time.

There are occasional reasons to attempt bonding of two or more fosters, but not without consent of the Fostering Committee. Adopters do sometimes want to adopt a bonded pair (an option which should be encouraged), but having more adoptable bonded pairs than demand justifies could inhibit adoptions. Some reasons to talk with the Fostering Committee Chair about bonding a pair of fosters include:

1. There is good reason to believe the fosters may be in the system for a while, and having a bunny companion might improve the bunnies’ quality of life during this wait.
2. A foster bunny has behavioral issues which might be alleviated or offset by having a companion bunny.
3. Two fosters possess personality or appearance characteristics which would make the pair

more “marketable” than the individual bunnies (they look more adorable together than separate, one bunny is more shy/independent while the other is particularly outgoing and affectionate, etc.).

What do I do if one of my fosters becomes ill?

When funds permit, Bunny Buddies will pay for all veterinary expenses (spays/neuters and treatment of ill/injured fosters). However, you must check with the Fostering Committee Chair first. You also must use one of our participating veterinarians. All of our foster rabbits are spayed or neutered when they are old enough (excepting rabbits with health conditions which make surgery inadvisable).

As we all know, rabbits often exhibit signs of illness (or we humans notice them) in evening hours and on holidays. If you feel your bunny’s condition is an emergency (judgment calls should be made as if the bunny were your own), try to reach the Fostering Committee Chair or another member of the Board of Directors to determine the most appropriate avenue for seeking treatment. Reimbursement for expenses incurred without prior authorization is subject to board approval.

If you’d like to help cover the expenses of your foster bunny’s veterinary care, the most helpful way to do this is to have the bunny treated by one of our participating vets, billing the treatment according to the arrangements we have with that vet. Then make a donation to Bunny Buddies to defray that expense. This is important for a couple of reasons. First, it gives us a more accurate record of the cost of fostering a bunny (critical data when we apply for grants and other funding). Second, it gives you a “cleaner” record of charitable donation for tax purposes or for employer matching grant programs.

What role do I play in the adoption process?

All adoptions must be screened by members of the adoption committee. There is usually a period of communication and “counseling” before an adoption application is approved. All adoptions must be approved in advance of an adoption event (“cold” adoptions are not permitted, with the quasi-exception of adoptions by already-approved Bunny Buddies members).

Adoptions are ultimately approved by a consensus of the Adoption Committee. However, the committee values the input of the foster parent and should bring you into the discussion to get your judgment as to the appropriateness of this person/family for this particular foster. Please understand that all of our fosters are special, and we want each one to go to a good home (making room for another bunny in need of a loving foster family). If you are convinced that there is no family good enough for your foster bunny, you might consider adopting him/her (see below).

What if I fall in love with my foster bunny and can’t let him/her go?

It happens! We jokingly and lovingly call this “foster failure.” While foster homes are an invaluable part—in fact, the foundation—of our rescue efforts, and we hope you can learn to let go and experience the joy of your “baby” finding a forever home, you do have “first dibs” on adopting your foster bunny. It’s much better if you reach that decision before a potential adopter also falls in love with your bunny, as this may spare the adopter a great deal of disappointment.

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