



**TEACHING KIDS ABOUT RABBITS**

Revised Edition for December 1997

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Dear friend of rabbits,

Thank you for ordering House Rabbit Society's information packet on teaching kids about rabbits.

The following is a collection of exercises for teaching kids of all ages about bunnies, particularly how to see the world through a rabbit's eyes. These activities are designed to give parents, teachers, and club project leaders ideas on how they can teach children-- both those who have rabbits and those who don't-- about the needs of wild and domestic bunnies. Included are techniques for reaching pre-school, elementary, and high school students, in one presentation or through a series of classes. Many of the exercises are imaginative and interactive and utilize intriguing factual information, stories, role-playing, and games.

This packet is one of several being put together. This particular one focuses on creating general presentations for groups of kids. A separate brochure available is from the national HRS Education Director that concentrates more in depth on how parents can work with their own children, especially pre-schoolers. The San Diego HRS Chapter has put together a coloring book for rabbits for kids who have bunnies.

I would like to acknowledge and thank the following people for sharing their ideas and working with me in developing and teaching these presentations: Carolyn Mixon, Amy Espie, Pam Patek, Katie Dinneen, Donna Jensen, Margie Wilson, and Paige Parsons. Special thanks go out to Evan and Hannah Woolbright, for always being so eager to engage in a round of "Let's Play Bunnies!"

Please let me know how the enclosed presentations work for you. I would appreciate any suggestions you have as well. Since new ideas are being generated all the time, it is my hope to periodically send out new program updates, so I will keep your name and file for this future information. If you would like assistance in creating specific programs or teaching aids, please feel free to contact us.

So HAPPY HOPPING !

## **Part I. Program Overview**

The primary focus of “Teaching Kids About Rabbits” is to get people to look at the world from the rabbit’s point of view. This perspective of looking at the world from the animal’s side is by no means automatic. The natural inclination of most kids when they see a bunny that is soft and fluffy and alive is to: (a) want to touch the bunny, (b) want to hold the bunny, and/or (c) want to feed the bunny. These are the immediate responses for most adults as well.

This tendency of human nature is aimed at what we want and expect from the animal. The conceptual transition of how all of this appears to the rabbit (does s/he want to be touched, carried, or fed by a stranger?) is something that usually needs to be taught. And that’s the point of many of the exercises.

### *Myths About Rabbits*

Companion bunnies are really quite different from their reputations. There are four myths that you, the teacher, must understand in order to accurately portray real rabbits.

**Myth #1** It is okay for pet rabbits to live outdoors. In reality, keeping a domestic rabbit outdoors is a time bomb. Hutch rabbits are at the mercy of predators, such as dogs, feral cats, raccoons, even birds of prey and coyotes. A rabbit does not have to be touched to be harmed: the mere presence of a predator can actually frighten a bunny to death. Then there are weather considerations; temperature extremes (hot and cold) and sudden temperature changes are very stressful to a rabbit’s health.

One of the most important reasons for rabbits to live indoors is that hutch and garage rabbits are often neglected or ignored. If a person doesn’t have to make an effort to go outside to visit bunny because bunny is right there in the living room or bedroom, bunny is going to get a lot more interaction and, consequently, be more friendly and interactive. Bunny receives more attention and, thus, is better cared for. It has taken decades for “house cats” to be accepted as normal for having received their place indoors. Now, it is the rabbits’ turn to become “house rabbits.”

**Myth #2** Rabbits are low maintenance. Rabbits need quite a bit of maintenance, both in daily care and in their social needs. The truth is, rabbits need as much attention as cats and dogs.

**Myth #3** Rabbits like to be held. Domestic rabbits are actually very social animals who require a lot of interaction. The difficulty is that most rabbits like their social interaction with humans on their own terms. So, the third myth that says rabbits are docile creatures who can be easily held and cuddled needs to be replaced by the more accurate image that most bunnies prefer their human’s affection down on the floor. And while many bunnies are extremely friendly and outgoing, there are just as many who require that you take time to cultivate a friendship before they will be willingly friendly to you.

Myth #4 Rabbits make good children's pets. They don't. Rabbits have delicate backs that are easily broken from being dropped or mishandled. Bunnies require much more attention than children can manage, both from a psychological and physical standpoint. The truth, however, is that rabbits make wonderful family pets--for the right family. Not everyone should have a rabbit, but in a family where the parents want the rabbit as much as the child does then that may be the right combination. For a rabbit to be a successful member of the family, there must be parental supervision. A grown-up must be the bunny's primary caregiver. And remember, most teenagers are still kids at heart.

### *Program Make-up*

When teaching kids about rabbits, at least half of the presentation should focus on looking at the world from the rabbit's point of view. Learning why bunnies behave the way they do helps kids (and big people) better understand and appreciate how the world looks and feels to a rabbit. This is the purpose of the program called Rabbit School, which is described in Part III.

Quite a variety of different exercises are suggested in this booklet so mix and match the activities as they fit your style and needs. The more exuberant you are as the teacher, the more intrigued the kids will be. Be sure to include pictures of house rabbits in your talk to give all of your information a context. Meeting a companion bunny in person is one thing, understanding how they interact with people in the home is an important other.

The Bunny Circle, Topic Circles, and Discovery Bags are some of the activities described in Part IV. A typical 60-minute class for kids from the public at a humane society can include a combination of a Photo Flip Chart, Rabbit School, brief Topic Circles, a Bunny Circle, and may end with Bunny Discovery Bags or stories with finger puppets. A 30-minute class could include a Photo Flip Chart, brief Rabbit School, and a Bunny Circle.

### *Using Real Rabbits*

Most kids' classes about bunnies take place in the context of someone who has a rabbit bringing the bunny in for them to meet. Before bringing the rabbit out in public, you must evaluate if the bunny is comfortable being there. Being around strangers, particularly ones with lots of little hands, can be exceedingly stressful to some bunnies. So, you need to look at how the experience will affect the rabbit as much how it will benefit the kids. You may need to give several small talks to the same group over several weeks to give a more aloof bunny time to get used to the idea of being out in public in the midst of so many eyes. For your first time out with a shy rabbit, you could simply bring bunny along, but keep bunny in a cage or pen while you go through the Rabbit School program. The next time, you could do a review of Rabbit School followed by a Bunny Circle, with bunny as the center of attention. Far better than bringing one rabbit is to bring a bonded pair (spayed/neutered of course).

### *The Challenge*

One of the biggest challenges of teaching kids about bunnies is to get them interested and excited about rabbits without making them want to go out and get one. As mentioned earlier, rabbits are not the right pet for most children. Rats are sometimes more

appropriate because they like to be handled and carried around in pockets and such. They also only live about three years, versus up to ten years for a rabbit, which reduces the common excuse that the child has “outgrown” the rabbit. However, rats also require parental supervision and are not appropriate for all children either.

To minimize the attractiveness of having a rabbit, be sure to explain to your audience that rabbits are not for everyone. Give a complete picture of what it’s like to live with the bunny, e.g. bunny-proofing means you have to keep your room really neat all the time or your toys or clothes (or homework) might get chewed up by the bunny. Rabbits also need to be played with and fed every single day. And the litterbox, and cage if there is one, needs to be cleaned regularly. Of course, do emphasize that rabbits are really fun and fascinating animals, but they are a daily commitment and can sometimes be a handful. As I said above, rabbits can be great companion animals for some families, but they are definitely not for everyone.

## **Part II. Presentation Hints**

### *Background Preparation*

The best way to teach, of course, is to be prepared by doing your research. Back issues of House Rabbit Journal, the HRS members’ newsletter, is one of your best resources on explaining and understanding true bunny behavior. Handouts can be made by copying the articles. Current information on how to order back issues is usually listed on the back page of each issue of HRJ. Information is also available on the HRS website at [www.rabbit.org](http://www.rabbit.org).

Drollery Press has several excellent sources of information available. One is a series of rabbit care videos, including the delightfully visual “Your First House Rabbit” (which even shows how rabbits really do dance). Then there’s the third edition of the entertaining and informative House Rabbit Handbook. The videos and HRH are by Marinell Harriman. The chord that was struck by the Handbook, with its many photographs, bunny biographies, and across-the-board health and behavior information, was one of the reasons House Rabbit Society was created. The book can be ordered through most bookstores. For information on ordering the book and videos, send a self-addressed-stamped envelope to Drollery Press, 1524 Benton, Alameda, CA 94501. The book and the videos all make terrific donations to any library.

### *Images of the Real Thing*

Photos, slides, and video give a much larger picture of how rabbits really behave. I feel that my flip chart of enlarged photos is essential when it comes to thoroughly teaching kids about bunnies. So, be sure to bring along pictures of your rabbit in action (not just sitting there looking posed or drowsy). House Rabbit Society calendars also provide terrific examples of house rabbits in action.

### *“Bunny Quiet”*

Here is a handy measure for helping focus the attention of young kids who might get noisy or excited. As a prologue to your presentation, ask “Does a rabbit make any

sound?” The answer is yes! They are capable of making quite a few sounds, BUT they’re usually very, very quiet. You can discuss what sounds they can make at this time or address that topic during the “Ears” segment of Rabbit School or in a Topic Circle. You can also mention here that their noses move all the time because that’s how they breathe, but that movement doesn’t have a sound. Have the kids practice being as quiet as rabbits by silently twitching their noses. Some may need to use a finger.

Now, if during the class things start to get rowdy, you can start wiggling your nose with your finger (so they can see what you’re doing) and announce, “Let’s be quiet rabbits!” or “Bunny quiet!” When everyone’s nose is silently twitching again, you can proceed.

### *Bunny Stand-ins*

It is helpful to bring along a collection of stuffed toy rabbits--preferably ones shaped like real rabbits (and not wearing clothes). Full-body rabbit puppets are especially handy because their bodies bend more like real bunnies, but even bunny slippers can be useful. When demonstrating how to handle and groom rabbits, the kids can use these toy rabbits for practice--saving a lot of wear and tear on the real rabbit.

Young children are tactile and have a strong urge to touch a real bunny. During the hands-off portion of the Bunny Circle with the real rabbit, pass out toy buns to occupy little hands so the eyes can focus on the real rabbit. Another option is to pass out bunny toys (jar lids, wire cat balls, baby keys, etc.). Stuffed toy bunnies can also be used to act out rabbit stories and for role-playing exercises (What if...?).

### *To Start*

One way to start a class is by asking if the kids if have any questions about rabbits up front. Find out which kids have rabbits, which don't; whose live indoors, whose don't. Maybe ask the kids who have rabbits, the bunnies’ names and if they live inside or out. Kids with rabbits will probably want to contribute quite a bit of information or tell lots of stories throughout the class, which can be distracting from what you are trying to teach. So, let the kids with bunnies know that you will give them time to talk about their rabbits near the end of class. During Topic Circle is a good time for that.

### *The end*

Be sure to end with a review of what was talked about. Or you can also ask each child what they learned from the class.

## **Part III. Rabbit School**

### *A. Introduction*

Rabbit School can be adapted for preschoolers all the way up to high school students and adults. I once taught a version of Rabbit School to group of about 100 people in an auditorium at a Bunny Day at Marin Humane Society in Novato, California. About half the people (and not all that many of them were kids) obligingly got out of their seats and went hopping and snuggling up and down the aisles, washing their faces with paws when asked, stopping to listen for predators on command. As I explained the four

characteristics of real rabbits (described below), I had the group do all sorts of bunny things. From the stage I could see the light bulbs of realization go off in their heads. Hopping around on the floor with their heads a few inches from the ground, they saw my point. Looking through a rabbit's eyes can have a tremendous impact on a person of any age.

For high school kids, Rabbit School fits very well into the framework of a drama or creative writing class. With its insight into what it means to be a prey animal, the exercise can also be incorporated into a biology class, expanding, of course, on the lagomorph order (rabbits are lagomorphs not rodents), as well as the differences between rabbits and hares and wild rabbits and domestic ones. In an art class, the artists, sketchbooks in hand, can stretch out their legs to make a people-fence for a Bunny Circle with the rabbit unrestricted in the center, while the rabbit educator reels off information about rabbits.

There are far more exercises listed below than can be done in one session, so pick and choose depending on the amount of time available, on whether or not the kids have rabbits, and on the age of the kids in the group.

*B. "Welcome to Rabbit School!"*

Lay a blanket or mat on the floor for kids to "hop" around on. Have everyone take off their shoes, since real rabbits don't wear shoes and because it's easier to hop around that way. Explain the premise behind "Rabbit School," which is to teach kids about bunnies by showing them how to act like real rabbits. By learning why rabbits act the way they do, kids will have a better understanding and respect for real rabbits.

*C. Four Characteristics of Real Rabbits*

These points can be introduced one-by-one and then repeated throughout the exercise:

1. Rabbits are prey animals.
2. Rabbits are intelligent.
3. Rabbits are individuals.
4. Rabbits are social animals.

*D. Explain the Difference between Wild and Domestic Rabbits*

There are two main types of rabbits: wild ones and domestic ones. Wild rabbits have been designed by nature to take care of themselves; they do not need people to take care of them. They live in fields, woodlands, and meadows. Their fur is colored to help camouflage them and they usually don't weigh more than a few pounds. They know which foods are safe to eat, how to build a safe place to live, when they should hide. Cottontails and brush bunnies are two types of wild rabbits. Wild rabbits only have babies at certain times of the year.

Domestic rabbits are a bit different from their wild cousins. Their looks and their ability to have babies all year round are the result of people breeding them for particular characteristics for over 500 years. There are over 50 types of domestic bunnies, ranging

in size from 2 pounds to 20 pounds. Domestic rabbits need people to help take care of them. They've lost the ability to know which plants are toxic. Although sometimes they can have fur that looks like wild rabbit (the color is called agouti), some bunnies with white or light fur are very easy for predators to locate.. Certain domestic breeds, such as angoras, have fur that needs daily grooming by people or the else the rabbit can't survive. (Feral rabbits are domestic animals which attempt to survive in the wild; however, it is a very difficult and dangerous existence for them.)

Note: Rabbits and hares are closely related, but somewhat different. The main difference is that hares are born above ground with their eyes open and are fully furred. Rabbits, on the other hand, are born in burrows and are blind and naked (no fur). Hares often seem to have bigger ears and longer legs. Jack rabbits and arctic rabbits are actually hares, while the domestic Belgian hare is really a rabbit. Also closely related to the rabbit and hare is the pika. This is a small mammal found in the mountains of North America. Pikas have little ears, short tails, and can make little yipping sounds. Hares, rabbits, and pikas all belong to the order of lagomorphs. (Although up until the turn of the century, they were considered members of the order of rodents, they no longer are, as their digestive system is quite different from rodents.)

#### *E. Physical Shape of a Rabbit*

This is the core of Rabbit School. You do not need to go over every body part described below or make all of the points that are noted. The age of the audience and amount of time will determine how many and which ones you will include.

How a bunny is shaped has a lot to do with how the bunny moves and reacts. For this reason, as part of Rabbit School, we are going to go over different parts of the outside of the bunny and explore how a body part is shaped and what it's used for. Now everyone gets down on the floor and assume the position of a real rabbit. (Suggested activities to illustrate particular points are noted in italics.)

#### LEGS / FEET

##### *Practice hopping.*

- \* How do rabbits move? (Difference in length between front and back legs is why rabbits hop.)
- \* You may need to point out that a bunny hop is not like a frog leap: It is generally front feet/back feet, not all four feet off the ground like a frog.
- \* What other animals hop? Frogs, kangaroos, wallabies, birds, some insects
- Back feet for running, leaping, thumping, kicking, scratching*
- \* Thumping is one way rabbits communicate. It can indicate wariness, alarm, fear, or anger. It can also be used to get another rabbit's attention.
- \* Back feet can be used for scratching itches, especially behind ears (Yes, bunnies get fleas.)
- \* Rabbits defend themselves by kicking with their powerful hind legs.
- \* Back legs are very strong so rabbits run very fast, but only for short distances.
- Front feet for digging, pushing, washing the face
- \* Rabbits do not hold items like Bugs Bunny.

- \* They are burrowing animals. They are ground-dwellers, meaning they don't climb tree trunks. (Although some rabbits have been observed climbing bushes.)
- Digging Exercise (See Digging , Tossing, and Nudge & Roll Practice in Part IV.)
- \* Rabbits need daily exercise outside of the cage.

After getting bunny-kids comfortable with acting like rabbits, make Point #1: RABBITS ARE PREY ANIMALS

- \* Rabbits' first concern is almost always: Is there someone out there who can eat me?
- \* What are predators that rabbits might have?
- \* Backyard predators are the reason why domestic rabbits should be supervised when outdoors and kept indoors at night. (Raccoons, for instance, are nocturnal.)

WHY do rabbits hop?

- \* Does a rabbit hop in a straight line? No, they zig-zap.
- \* Hopping with those powerful back legs makes them run in quick, unpredictable patterns.

BACKBONE / Carrying rabbits

- \* A rabbit has very delicate bones. The back can be broken if mishandled or dropped.

Most rabbits dislike being picked up for the reason that they are prey animals.

- \* Being off the ground puts them in a very vulnerable position.

Exercise: Simulation of being picked up: Ask for a (small) volunteer. Explain that what you are about to do might be startling to the child but not to worry. While the child is in a bunny position, walk up from behind and snatch the child off the ground (or just grab the child from behind suddenly, if too big to pick up).

- \* Ask, How different does this feel from being grabbed and carried off in a dog's mouth or snatched and flown away in an eagle's talons?
- \* It's a long ways to the ground...

Exercise: Have all adults who are present and have half of kids stand up and be humans while the rest of the kids stay on the floor, on all fours, as rabbits. Point out the distance from where the bunny's head is to human's. Holding a toy bunny also illustrates this point well.

- \* What do the "bunnies" see down there? people's ankles, shoes, chair legs, grass

Rabbits also dislike being held because they are independent.

- \* They have an "I can do it myself" attitude.
- \* It's sort of similar to when Aunt Sadie pinches your cheek and says you are so cute. You don't like that do you?

\* What would it be like to have someone pick you up anytime they wanted to? Would you like carried around like a doll or a toy? How would you feel?

Some rabbits don't mind being picked up, but most may be fearful of being lifted off the ground--at least until they learn to trust the person who is picking them up.

This brings us to Point # 2: RABBITS ARE INDIVIDUALS

## Rabbit strategies for escape

- \* Sit absolutely still.
- \* Bolt suddenly and hop in quick unpredictable patterns.
- \* This ability to escape is why it can be so difficult to catch a bunny when it's time to go back to the cage.

## TAIL

- \* A twitching tail can mean the bunny is up to something mischievous. (Practice tail twitching.)
- \* The tail is raised to go to the bathroom. And yes, rabbits can be trained to use a litterbox. (Here you can talk about "marbles" and what a litterbox is for. Discuss how a litterbox is kind of like a burrow.)

## FUR & SKIN

Practice grooming.

- \* Rabbits come in many colors; ask kids what color their own rabbits are.
- \* Wild rabbits usually come in camouflage colors (Remember PREY animals!), such as browns and grays (called "agouti") of cottontails; in white, like the arctic rabbit, who lives in all year in snow; or both colored and white, like the snowshoe rabbit, whose coloring depends on the season.
- \* Because of selective breeding, domestic rabbits come in all sorts of colors, markings, and types of fur: white, brown, tan, black, blond, agouti, spots, circles, stripes, patches, mixes, etc.
- \* Yes, rabbits get fleas.
- \* All rabbits, no matter what the breed, shed occasionally.
- \* Some rabbits are raised for so that their fur can be made into fur coats. (Boo! Hiss!)
- \* Angora rabbit wool is combed or plucked off the bunny for yarn.

## THE HEAD

Ears

- \* long
- \* lop or up-ear
- \* sharp sense of hearing
- \* used to listen for predators I hear a predator approaching, what do we do?
- \* movable rotate toward sounds
- \* body language

Practice washing ears.

Face

- \* expresses emotions
- \* In the beginning, when most rabbits are getting to know a new person, they prefer to be petted on top of head and between eyes.

Eyes

- \* on side of head (not directly in front like humans)

- \* used to see movement (predators)
  - \* Don't see well up close --even if they do eat a lot of carrots
  - \* wide face, like a horse
- Exercise: Place palm in front of your face, flat against the nose. Bring index finger of other hand up to back of hand. Can you see the index finger? Slowly pull finger away from face. How far do you have to move it before you see it? This is what a rabbit's vision is like.
- \* Don't see rabbits with their eyes closed very often; they sleep mostly with eyes partially open.

#### Nose

- \* breathing -- always moving
- \* practice nose twitching
- \* used to smell objects and food
- \* used to sniff the air for predators PREY ANIMALS
- \* used to sniff for other rabbits Point #3: RABBITS ARE SOCIAL ANIMALS
- \* practice snuggling
- \* practice petting and being petted
- \* for pushing and knocking things over, such as food and water bowls

#### Mouth/Teeth

- \* Sharp teeth, which grow continuously like rodents
  - \* Chew wood, twigs
  - \* Cords (look like vines), books
- Biting/communication
- \* Eat vegetation (vegetables, fruit, hay, grasses) --Rabbits are "herbivores." People are "vegetarians."
- Biting--communication
- \* when angry or upset
  - \* to say "get out of my way" (Often means the person wasn't paying attention to what the rabbit was trying to say in her very quiet way.)
  - \* Nudge and toss practice
  - \* "tooth purr"--A bunny will grind his teeth to show contentment.

#### Tongue

- \* for drinking and eating
- \* Licking: to groom selves and others
- \* to show affection -- other rabbits, people, other animals

#### Chin

- \* Chinning--Rabbits have a gland on the chin used to "claim" objects. It leaves a scent that humans cannot smell, but which other rabbits can.
- \* Rabbits are territorial but also SOCIAL.
- \* Rabbits may also drop marbles (or urinate) outside the litterbox to "claim" territory.

#### Voice

- \* sounds they can make

#### Whiskers

- \* pick up sensations
- \* show width of body, which is helpful for these burrowers
- \* clean whiskers
- \* tickle other animals and people

#### Mind

- \* THEY ARE INDIVIDUALS
- \* Distinct personalities
- \* Personal likes and dislikes
- \* Have different food preferences
- \* Point #4: RABBITS ARE INTELLIGENT
- \* Like to have toys
- \* Create games
- \* can get bored, into trouble
- \* --in this case, rabbits are similar to Bugs Bunny
- \* require mental stimulation and physical exercise

#### BELLY BUTTON

- \* Does a rabbit have a belly button? Because they are mammals, of course they do.
- \* reproduction
- \* baby bunnies
- \* Importance of spay/neuter

#### ENTIRE BODY

- \* Different sleep positions, the “Roll over Plop/Drop Dead flop”
- \* Wake up and stretch
- \* dance/leap
- \* “The Rabbit smile”--See House Rabbit Handbook.

*Summary of 4 Points: Rabbits are intelligent, sociable, prey animals who are individuals.*

You can thank everyone for being such good bunnies at Rabbit School by patting each one on the head or under the chin. Follow up with educational games and topic circles.

#### **Part IV. Other Educational Activities**

##### *BUNNY CIRCLE OR RABBIT IN THE ROUND*

Note: This should only be done with a rabbit who truly likes to go out in public and isn't shy around strangers, especially kids.

Also be aware that real rabbits are real scene stealers, so it works best to do the bulk of your educational presentations before letting the kids see the real bunny. This is especially true for young children. Once little kids see bunnies, their minds are so full of wanting to touch the rabbit, that it can be hard to hold their attention with little things like bunny facts.

A bunny circle works best in with a group of 6-8, but it can be done with as many as 30.

Have kids sit on floor in a tight circle, bodies close together --no little spaces-- to form a "people fence." (Be sure to have a rug or grass mat in center for bun to hop on if floor is bare.) Begin presentation by holding up a stuffed toy rabbit and having a discussion on how a toy bunny is different from a real rabbit. Humor is very helpful here. (For example, one would never pick up a real bunny by the ear, toys don't need their litterboxes cleaned, etc.)

Before letting one or two real bunnies into circle, explain the one ground rule: Now is a time for watching the rabbit and to let the rabbit come to them; bunny can touch, hop on, or sniff anyone in the circle but no one except bunny's person can touch the rabbit. Explain that this is how we teach rabbits to trust people--frightened bunnies will run away. After bunny has hopped around and investigated some, then kids can be instructed to put one hand--in a fist or flat-- on floor in front of them, but not to move it. Bun may come over to sniff. Later on, the bunny's person may sit on floor with the bunny for the kids to pet one at a time. (Minimize carrying and lifting the real rabbit--actions speak louder than words, i.e., open carrier and let bunny hop out on his own This will reinforce the message that you don't have to hold the bunny to enjoy her company.)

**FOCUS:** What is it like to be a rabbit? Talk about what bunnies are really like; try to get kids to see the world through the rabbit's eyes. Ask, "What does the bunny see right now?" The answers would be shoes, knees, people's faces, etc. What is bunny smelling?

Help kids understand that rabbits are delicate animals (very skinny bones) and each one has his or her own likes and dislikes. Have kids watch how the bunny moves. Help kids understand that rabbits (even though they may like to climb on top of things) are ground-dwellers who don't usually like to be picked up and often like to sleep in places that feel safe like burrows.

Ask kids to imagine what it must be like for bunny to be in the center of a group of kids. How would each of them feel in that situation?

### *TOPIC CIRCLES*

If you have several bunny-knowledgeable volunteers to help you, divide a large group of kids into several smaller groups. Each circle will discuss a different topic for 5-10 minutes. Topics can include cage set-up, grooming and handling, diet, toys, indoor vs. outdoors, etc. This is also a good time to do a Bunny Circle. When time is up, either the

kids or the teachers will move to the next circle for the next topic. One way to begin or end a presentation is with true/false questions.

Another topic could be carrying and holding rabbits --how to do it and why not to; for kids who have rabbits.

### *STORIES*

Read aloud selected short stories from House Rabbit Journal.

"The Secret Life of a Rabbit," HRJ vol. II, #8

"Margaret's Garden," HRJ vol. I, #10

"Gutherie" HRJ vol.

"The Rabbit in the Moon" HRJ vol.

You can also have kids act the story as you read it. They can play the bunnies themselves, or you can hand out toy bunnies or paper rabbit finger puppets.

There are many storybooks featuring rabbits. Preferably, pick ones that are told from the bunny's viewpoint and ones that focus on how real bunnies might act rather than people stories with rabbits acting as stand-ins for people.

Suggestions:

*The Velveteen Rabbit* by Margery Williams

*The Golden Egg Book* by Margaret Wise Brown

*The Whispering Rabbit* by Margaret Wise Brown

*Peter Rabbit* by Beatrix Potter (Do point out that real rabbits do not wear clothes.)

### *GAMES*

"Bugsy Says" (or "Harvey Says" or "Thumper Says") Ages 5-9

This game reinforces concepts and rabbit actions learned at Rabbit School and is played along the lines of "Simon Says." The game can be prefaced with "Can you listen as well as a rabbit?" At subsequent meetings or classes, kids can take turns being the leader.

Directions: Place a masking tape starting line across the length of the floor at one end of the room. All kids start here. The leader, "Bugsy" (or "Harvey" or "Thumper"), announces rabbit movements that the kids are supposed to act out--but only if the command begins with "Bugsy says....." Any one who enacts the command when there was no "Bugsy says," goes back to the starting line.

"Bugsy" (the caller) usually stands still, but in the beginning, Bugsy may need to show how to do some of the movements (as a reminder or for encouragement.) It's nice to have an experienced volunteer pantomiming the motions alongside Bugsy so Bugsy doesn't give anything away.

Here are some examples of ways to trip up the "bunnies," which makes the game more fun: "Bugsy says hop once. Pause. Take two more hops. Oops! I didn't say ËBugsy

says’!” or “Bugsy says dig. Bugsy says keep digging. Okay, stop. Oops! I didn’t say  
ÈBugsy says’!”

#### Movements:

- Wash your face.
- Wash your ears.
- Stand on your hind legs.
- Sniff the air.
- Look around.
- Take one hop. (Or two or three.)
- Dig.
- Chin something.
- There’s a predator! Stand absolutely still.
- Thump.
- Scratch.
- Scratch your ear with your back foot.
- Twitch your tail! (Can use hand for tail.)
- Twitch your nose.
- Twitch your whiskers. (Can use hands.)
- Snuggle another bunny.
- Leap in the air.
- Dance!
- Lay on your tummy.
- Stretch your back feet out. (The “smile.”)

#### Variations:

"Follow the Leader" or "Rabbit Practice" Up to age 7

Young children can sit in a circle or follow the leader around in a line, copying the leader’s actions as they change. Call out each action as you do it.

"Rabbit Charades" For kids with rabbits; ages 8-12

Substitute a game of charades for older kids or for those who have bunnies and are therefore already familiar with bunny actions. Write rabbit movements from “Bugsy Says” onto individual scraps of paper and put them in a hat. Divide group into two teams. A team-member picks out a piece of paper and then pantomimes the bunny action. If they are within the time limit, the team receives one point for identifying the action. They receive a second point if they can explain what it means (chinning, for instance).

Activity: Bunny Discovery Bags All ages

Kids can put these sacks of goodies together for their own bunnies or to be given to rabbits in shelters or foster homes. Be sure to consult first with the shelter or foster home to see if they have any preferences or special requirements. (Fresh herbs should not be used if the sack is not going to be offered immediately.)

#### Materials

- Luncheon-size brown bags for each child (or bunny)

Plus a selection of 4 or more of the following:

- \* loose hay
- \* pine cones
- \* organic apple, fig, or pear twigs (with or without leaves)
- \* empty toilet paper tubes
- \* fresh or home-dried herbs or carrot tops
- \* jar lids
- \* untreated wicker paper plate holders cut into quarters
- \* small amounts of organic banana chips, raisins, sunflower seeds, or peanuts  
(Note: explain that these are junk foods, and should be given sparingly.)

Instructions:

Put 3-5 different items into a lunch bag. Twist top of sack shut. Give to rabbit.

Discussion:

Rabbits are individuals who will vary in how they play with the bags, in what they do with each item, and in which items will give them pleasure. For example, some bunnies will rip open the bag to see what's inside, especially if they smell something delicious like fresh hay or aromatic herbs. Some buns will need to have the sack opened for them and they'll do the rest. A few will need to have the items handed to them one at a time before they will show any interest.

What will rabbits do with each item? They will vary here too. Which items are "treats"? Which are chew toys and which are noise makers?

Collecting Items:

For on-going groups, this is an activity where the materials can all be collected over time (such as jar lids or toilet paper rolls) or each child could be assigned to gather, prepare, and bring a bunch of one specific item to the next meeting. Kids could also plant and grow the herbs as part of the group.

Follow-up

A follow-up for on-going groups is to have the kids give reports of how their rabbits responded to the discovery sacks. If the sacks were made for a foster home or shelter, ideally, at least a few of the kids should get a chance to observe how these bunnies react to the bags.

Digging, Tossing, and Nudge & Roll Practice Ages 5-9

Loosely lay a blanket or sheet on the floor. While pretending to be rabbits, have the kids practice smoothing out the lumps, bumps, bubbles, and wrinkles using their front legs. Sometimes a full body stretch is required. Other bunnies like to use their front feet to poke or stamp out the bubbles. Have the bunny-kids practice digging holes and then smooth out the pretend dirt. Point out that when some real rabbits get on the bed, often

they will smooth out all the wrinkles in the covers in this exact way.. They use the same movements for smoothing dirt and wrinkles.

(Once, when my rabbit Holly got up on the bed, she was working diligently at smoothing all the lumps and wrinkles out of the blankets. Then she came to a big lump which was actually the sleeping cat, Gloucester. Holly was so intent on smoothing the covers that she smoothed the cat right off the bed! Gloucester woke up in time to clutch a couple of claws full of quilt and was just hanging there blinking her eyes, trying to wake up from this terrible dream.)

After the blanket has been smoothed, set out a selection of plastic glasses and bowls as well as lots of bunny toys (hard plastic baby rattles, jar lids, empty toilet paper tubes, boxes.) Perhaps put the toys in the bowls so the “bunnies” can have the thrill of spilling them. Rabbits are notorious for knocking things over with their noses, especially food dishes. Have bunny-kids practice manipulating their world using their bunny noses, paws, and teeth. One hand held up at the mouth can be used for pretend teeth.

#### Simulated Rabbit Enclosure Ages 5-12, geared for kids with rabbits

This is another role-playing exercise. It is especially effective for helping kids with rabbits imagine what it might be like to be left alone in a cage. Set up a child-size rabbit enclosure. This could be a large box with windows cut in the sides, a dog exercise pen, or a small empty room (nothing on the floor) such as a bathroom or closet with a baby gate across the doorway. Chairs in an auditorium, with seats facing out, could also be used to create a fenced-in area.

Have one child at a time act as the bunny. To start, the “cage” should have just a food and water bowl. Have the kids imagine what life would be like if that’s where you had to spend every minute of your life. It would be very boring and lonely. Not all rabbits need cages or enclosures, but some do. The point to get across is that the enclosure should be comfortable and come with some entertainment. Discuss what would make the enclosure more comfortable.

A box or a towel over one end of the cage would give bunny a place to go if he got scared or if he wanted some privacy or a dark spot. A litterbox is not only a good place to go to the bathroom, but, as burrowing animals, most rabbits also like to sleep in them. Sturdy boxes are also fun for chewing and climbing on. A rug, board, or towel may be more comfortable to rest on than a bare floor or cage wire. (Note: wire floors are very wearing to the bottom of rabbit’s feet, so for safety reasons there needs to be some sort of smooth surface inside of the cage.) As suggestions are made, add a privacy box or towel as well as a (child-size) plastic tub or cardboard box or laundry basket for a litterbox. Since rabbits love to tip their bowls, the bowls may need to be replaced by a water bottle and heavy crock; have “bunny” demonstrate tipping before making the change.

Towels can be bunched up and dug at for fun and boxes can be chewed and shredded, but what else can make enclosure time more entertaining? Toys! The more time rabbits

spend in cages, the more they like toys. Chew toys (logs, sticks, untreated wicker baskets, hay in a tub, etc.), nudge and toss toys (hard plastic baby toys, plastic slinkies, smooth metal tins, etc.) Toys can be laid on the floor and tied to the walls and ceiling. Hanging toys that dangle and get in bunny's way are mental stimulation. Toys on the door encourage bunny to chew and rattle the toys instead of chewing on the baby gate or cage wire. Talk about how some cages are too small for these niceties, and how cages that are too small need to be replaced. Discuss how rabbits are individuals and how not all rabbits like all toys and that not all bunnies require cages when indoors.

To help kids understand how lonely it can be to be left alone for long periods, even with toys, have one child sit in the enclosure (with only one toy so it's not too entertaining) for 5 or 10 minutes while the rest of the group does something else and completely ignores the "bunny." Even if the "bunny" clamors for attention, say mockingly, "Oh we're too busy right now, so be quiet." When the time is up, interview the "bunny." Discuss how tiring it would be to not to ever be able to take more than a few steps before having to turn around because you would be surrounded by walls.. Both rabbits and kids like to be able to run and jump. Try to help the kids understand how important it is for them to spend time with their companion rabbits--every day-- and to give their bunnies supervised exercise time out of the enclosure--every day. Add a second "bunny" and see what they think of that.

Other enclosure role-playing could include discussing what it might be like to be trapped in an outdoor hutch when it's hot or really cold outdoors, when there's a storm, when there's a predator lurking about, or when no one has come out to see you except to give you a little food and then they left you all alone again.

Ask if there are any changes the kids would make after doing this role-playing. Will they make changes in the bunny's enclosure? Will they give bunny more attention? Spend more time on the floor with bunny?

### Tape a Cottontail to the Rabbit Picture

This is a very popular with kids under ten. To give it an educational perspective, include a discussion of the bunny's tail. An explanation of the tail's use in communication/body language is described in "Rabbit School." You can also talk about the shape. Rabbit tails are not round powder puffs or cotton balls. Usually most of the tail is hidden under the body.

### Supplies

- \* Several cutouts, posters, or other pictures of individual rabbits, which include the tail area
- \* Bandannas or other cloths for blindfolds
- \* Cotton balls, small post-its, scotch tape, pen

Directions: Attach one or more large pictures of rabbits to the wall at different heights.

To make a reusable cottontail: (1) Write each child's name on the topside of a post-it. (2) The child then selects a cotton ball and tapes it above his or her name. The back-side of the post-it is lightly sticky so it can be used over again and will not damage picture. (Clever, huh?)

One child at a time is blindfolded and aimed at the wall. (Older kids can then be spun gently three times.) The cottontailer then tries to put the tail in the appropriate place. NOTE: NO ONE SHOULD BE ALLOWED TO TOUCH THE WALL--EITHER BEFORE OR DURING A TURN! Past experience shows that bright kids figure out where the tail goes by touching the edge of the picture.

Cottontails are left in place as each child takes a turn. Tail closest to where a real tail would be wins. Repeat for several rounds.

Additional observations More than one blindfold makes the game move faster. Cut-outs of bunny ears could also be taped onto post-its. More than one picture, at different heights, makes it easier for different age kids; they also make multiple rounds more fun. The game can be expanded by adding additional cut-outs, such as ears, noses, whiskers, etc.

#### Making Toothpicks (A Game to Play with Real Rabbits) Ages 5 and up

This is a game people can play with their rabbits. Pick a quiet time for this interaction. (Some rabbits out in public may not be interested in participating, some might.) Start with something skinny and chewable, such as a piece of hay or twig. Hold it laterally in front of the bunny's mouth so that it goes along in front of the bunny's nose. (Don't point it at bunny!) Hold onto it tightly. Usually, bunny will try to bite it in two right next to your fingers. Move your fingers down and offer the item again. Most bunnies will do this several times, leaving short lengths of whatever it was. When you can tell bunny is getting tired of the game, let bunny grab it and fling it (instead of holding on to it).

Domestic rabbits seem to have a programmed reason for biting long skinny things, like telephone cords and shoelaces. Perhaps they resemble the vines and grasses their wild cousins had to chomp through to get through brushy areas. Or, it may be that they like to eat grasses, vines, and twigs...