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Introducing a New Rabbit to Your Home

- Domestic rabbits are social species and tend to live in organized social groups. With rabbits, as with any other species, it can be a challenge to introduce a stranger into a pre-established social group or to a single animal that is used to living alone. As such, it is extremely important to gradually introduce rabbits into new environments and new individuals properly in order to prevent any undue stress and associated behavioral problems.
- Ideally, rabbits should be introduced at 6-12 weeks of age, as this is their socialization period where they begin learning how to behave appropriately toward other rabbits. If this is not possible, unfamiliar rabbits should be introduced very gradually so that they can become habituated, desensitized, and counter-conditioned to living with other rabbits. Please follow these step-by-step instructions to ensure a calm and successful introduction and to prevent encouraging any adverse behaviors in the process.

STEPS FOR INTRODUCTION

1. Place the new rabbit in a room that is completely closed off from other pets. It is important to make sure that the new rabbit is comfortable in its new environment before throwing it into a more stressful situation. If the new rabbit appears anxious or stressed by the relocation, please wait until it adjusts to its surroundings before moving forward.
2. It is important to make sure that both rabbits are comfortable with being in a cage before initiating the next step. Start by leaving the cage in an area where they will see it often with the door open. Then begin placing treats and toys in the cage to encourage them to enter it on their own and to associate the cage with good experiences.
3. Once the rabbits are comfortable with being in their cages, you can begin the introduction process. Place both rabbits in separate houses or cages and set them adjacent to one another in the same room while continuously giving each rabbit treats. It is very important that they receive treats throughout the introduction process to ensure that they focus on the treats instead of one another. They will also start associating positive experiences with being near each other as opposed to reinforcing negative associations, such as experiencing fear or aggression while they are together. This will allow them to be able to see, smell, hear, and get used to one another without being able to fight. If either rabbit starts displaying aggressive (such as lunging toward the cage wall) or fearful (such as hiding at the opposite side of the cage) behaviors, stop the session and try again later. As long as there are no signs of stress from both rabbits, keep the sessions daily moving the cages closer together. This step can take several weeks and should not be rushed.
4. It is important that the rabbits are familiarized with a harness and leash before initiating the next step. A rabbit can become accustomed to wearing a harness and leash if they are given sufficient time to get used to it and are trained properly. Introducing the harness is a gradual process and should be conducted with several training sessions (please refer to our handout on harness training for more information). Many rabbits will often freeze the first time the harness is put on. Taking the rabbit out to an area with clover or grass for them to graze may help encourage them to walk freely while wearing the harness.

Information cited from:

Mayer, J and Donnelly, T., eds. Clinical Veterinary Advisor: Birds and Exotic Pets. Elsevier, Philadelphia, PA. 2013. ISBN: 9781-4160-3969-3

5. Once the rabbits are able to walk around comfortably in their harnesses, introduce them under supervision while they are on leash. Again, it is very important that they are continuously given treats and experiencing something positive throughout this step. We want the rabbits to concentrate on the positive experiences when first being introduced to avoid associating being together with aversive experiences. This will allow them to interact with one another while providing you with the safety of being able to separate them if they begin to show aggressive behaviors or start to fight.

Take both rabbits to a neutral area, typically in an area where neither rabbit is usually allowed to be loose, as they can become aggressive over core activity areas. You will need one handler per rabbit to ensure each is properly supervised and able to be properly restrained if needed. The rabbits are now allowed to approach one another if they so choose, but only if they are not showing signs of aggression or fear. Look for, and encourage (with treats or praise), any friendly or calm behaviors. Ritualized dominance (where one rabbit places its head over the other rabbit) is a normal behavior used to establish roles and avoid overt aggression and maybe be shown in this context. If either rabbit exhibits any fear related or aggressive behaviors, calmly pull them away from each other and be sure not ignore the behavior and try to do not overreact (i.e. forcefully pulling on the leash, yelling, or hitting the animal) as this could cause more anxiety and increase aggression.

If a calm, non-aggressive introduction cannot be conducted at home, you may need to seek help from a veterinary or behavioral professional to facilitate this process. You can also try placing toys and treats around the room to get the rabbits focused on these items instead of on each other. This will allow them to start gaining positive associations while being together. If the rabbits do not pay attention to each other, do not force any interaction and wait for them to freely approach one another on their own time.

6. If the rabbits interact well at this stage, take the leash off and allow them to roam the room freely while under supervision. Be aware that fights can still occur during this step, so have a towel ready to separate them if they become aggressive or start to fight. Also be sure to have treats available at all times.

7. If the rabbits continue to interact well, allow them to roam freely in other areas of the home while under supervision. Continue to expand this training throughout the house to ensure there is no aggression associated with any given area.

The time required to peacefully and successfully introduce two rabbits can vary tremendously. This process can take anywhere from a few days to a few weeks, so it is important to remember to be patient and not to rush any of these steps. By the end of this training process, you should have two happy, well-adjusted rabbits!

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