



DOGS AND RABBITS – INTRODUCTION AND COEXISTENCE

Rabbits can get along with pets of a different species in the home. Before proceeding with introducing your rabbit to your dog, it is important to understand that dogs are predators by nature and rabbits are prey by nature. This means the introduction may take more time than anticipated and there are also no guarantees that it will work. It is advisable that you give it a good deal of thought before proceeding with bringing either a rabbit or dog into your home.

Dog vs. Rabbit – Natural History: It is in your best interest and the best interest of the animals that you know the breed of dog involved in the introduction. There are certain dog breeds that are “hard wired” with a high prey drive. Meaning is in their nature to be driven or highly motivated to chase and/or attack small animals, even if that animal is the same species. For instance, Rhodesian Ridgebacks, Greyhounds and Irish Wolfhounds are dog breeds that have an increased potential for prey drive.

What is Your Dog’s Knowledge of Basic Obedience? If your dog doesn’t already respond extremely well to your vocal commands (dog responds and retreats immediately to “leave it!” or “back away”), steps should be taken to ensure that they do. This is important in case the dog begins to chase or lunge at the rabbit, you know that the dog will respond to your command for them to stop immediately. If this behavior is not solid or is frequently ignored, you can never be sure that the dog will NOT harm the rabbit without a leash on the dog and/or a barrier between the dog and rabbit. Small animals moving quickly will set a “high prey drive” dog off within seconds, and it is much more difficult for a dog with high prey drive to curtail their chase behavior or resist its instinct to chase.

INTRODUCTION STEPS:

1. **Find a Neutral Space:** Locate a space in your home that is not already frequently used or occupied by either animal. It should be a space in which you can control the interaction as well. This will reduce or eliminate any territorial behavior.
2. **Secure the Rabbit in Safe Enclosure:** Place the rabbit in a crate or cage before bringing it to the neutral space. Allow the rabbit to acclimate there for ½ hour or more before you introduce the dog into the space. If the rabbit is showing signs of stress, delay or postpone the introduction process for as long as a day or two. Signs that a rabbit is stressed include biting the cage/crate bars, over-grooming, displaying altered feeding or toileting behavior and/or repeatedly circling the enclosure.
3. **Secure the Dog:** Secure the dog with a leash attached to its collar or to a front-clipping harness before entering the introduction space.
4. **Ask for Help:** Ask a family member or friend to help by holding your dog. You want the most supervision possible and having an extra set of hands and eyes will work to your advantage.
5. **Introduce Them Slowly:** Do not introduce the dog and rabbit hastily. The rabbit will have been placed in its cage in the neutral space ahead of time. Bring the dog into the space slowly and allow the dog to investigate the rabbit in its crate – visually and through smell. Don’t make sudden moves or allow them access to one another too quickly.
6. **Introduction Without Solid Barriers:** Though considerable caution should be used, the rabbit and dog can meet without the rabbit in a cage/crate. The dog, however, must be tightly secured and kept from freely interacting with the rabbit on its own. This setup is more for the freedom of the rabbit to have the choice of interacting with the dog but still able to move away or choose not to interact.

- Once again, watch the rabbit for signs of stress or distress. If the rabbit is kicking, breathing hard, or trying to escape, then remove the dog from the room and let the rabbit calm down. Keep in mind that, if the rabbit stops moving altogether, is hunkered down and “frozen”, this may also indicate a reluctance or refusal to interact or accept interaction from the dog.
 - By the same token, make sure the dog is not stressed or even over-excited. If you observe either of these behaviors in the dog, postpone the introduction until the dog is in a calmer state.
7. **Keep an Eye on Them:** Under no circumstances are the rabbit and dog allowed to be left together without supervision until there is no question as to whether one might be able to harm, scare or cause undue stress to the other.
 8. **Keep Sessions Short:** Don’t push your luck by allowing the introduction period to get too long. Keep the introduction sessions short... no more than 10 minutes. Longer exposure to one another will increase the potential for the dog to get too excited or the rabbit to begin getting stressed or its stress level to escalate.
 9. **Practice the Routine:** Your pets may not hit it off right away, and that’s okay. Practice introducing your pets to each other until it becomes a routine. Eventually, your pets will get used to seeing and smelling each other.
 10. **Separate Feeding Areas:** It is best to separate your dog and rabbit during meal times or when/if food is around. Heightened stress levels or over-excitement can be distracting, intrusive or stressful and may create negative associations with food.