*Rabbits in the Classroom*

Many schools have a classroom pet and many of these are rabbits.  In most cases they are brought in to teach the students about responsibility, however, it’s a lesson never learned.  At the end of every school year, rescues and shelters are overwhelmed with classroom pets that are dumped because they have nowhere to go.  How does this teach a classroom of children about responsibility?  The answer is it doesn’t.  All it does is teach them that animals are disposable and responsibility is something you can walk away from when it becomes inconvenient.

Rabbit Rescue will not place rabbits in a classroom or other facility.  There are many reasons for this, and if your are considering a classroom rabbit, please consider these factors before doing so.

 **Companionship**

Rabbits are highly intelligent and social creatures. They are happiest when in the company of another rabbit. They love to groom, cuddle, sleep and play together and can develop a strong and endearing bond. Solitary rabbits will bond with their owner and will often display affection, delight, curiosity and joy when in their company. These relationships are crucial to a rabbit’s overall good health and mental well-being. Classroom rabbits are often solitary rabbits that are never given the opportunity to socialize with other rabbits or one primary caregiver. They are constantly surrounded by strange and unfamiliar faces, loud voices and busy hands. They often become withdrawn, aggressive and/or depressed.

**Housing & Exercise**

Rabbits need a suitably sized cage and plenty of exercise time. The smallest a cage should be is three hops long and tall enough for a rabbit to stand up on its hind legs. But even a cage this size should never be a place for any rabbit to reside exclusively. Rabbits need exercise. They need to be out of their cage to allow them to stretch their legs, hop, run and play. They need to be able to socialize, to interact, to explore and be comfortable. They should be out of their cage for a minimum of 6 hours each day. Classroom rabbits get a cage that is often way too small and little, if any, exercise time. This confinement and lack of freedom stunts their personalities and affects their mental health. Rabbits who are denied exercise will often suffer from atrophied muscles, sore hocks, GI problems, improper growth and obesity and many of these issues lead to other health problems and concerns.

**Natural Time Clock**

Rabbits, by nature, follow a unique time schedule. Rabbits are crepuscular animals, which mean they are active at dawn and at dusk, getting most of their sleep at night and during the day. Classroom rabbits are forced to live by a schedule that is not natural for them. During the day when they are trying to sleep, they are surrounded by loud, busy children who are constantly poking, prodding and trying to play with them. Later in the day, when the rabbit is awake and wanting to socialize and interact with its caregiver, everyone has gone home, leaving this poor, lonely creature to sit in a cage and stare at four barred walls.

**Knowledgeable & Experienced Caregiving**

Rabbits need a caregiver that knows how to take care of a rabbit, someone who knows how to properly feed, hold and care for a rabbit. They also need a caregiver who can recognize illness or unusual behaviours that are indicative of underlying health issues. Classroom rabbits rarely have a caregiver that has taken the time to properly research a rabbit’s needs and abilities. They end up living in their own filth because the caregiver doesn’t know a rabbit can be litter trained, they often go without the proper food or toys to play with. And when a caregiver isn’t around to get to know a rabbit, they usually don’t notice changes in behaviours that can signify the beginning of a serious health issue. Classroom rabbits rarely make it to a vet in time. Most are found dead in their cages with the caregiver not having a clue as to why they have died.

**Diet & Nutrition** Rabbits need a proper diet consisting of fresh, unlimited hay, fresh greens daily and a small amount of pellets. Hay is extremely important as it helps a rabbit’s delicate digestive system stay clean and unblocked, preventing gas and GI Stasis, an often quick and fatal medical condition. Most classroom rabbits are fed pellets, as a dietary stable. It is rare for a classroom rabbit to ever receive hay or fresh greens. This inadequate diet, combined with the lack of exercise, results in an overweight and sickly rabbit, prone to a host of other health issues.

**Allergies** Having a classroom rabbit (or any pet) can increase the risk of allergic reactions in susceptible students. Rabbits in particular produce allergens that can be transmitted to children through the air or by direct contact. With hay being the most important staple of a rabbit’s diet, teachers must also consider, in addition to allergic reactions to the rabbit itself, the possibility of allergies to hay and grasses as well.

**Spaying & Neutering** A rabbit needs to be spayed or neutered, not just to help with the over population issues, but for the rabbit’s overall good health. An unspayed rabbit has up to 80% chance of developing reproductive cancers by the age of five. Spaying and neutering also helps with litter training and curbing aggression, “mounting” and the spraying of urine to mark territory. Classroom rabbits are rarely spayed or neutered. Upon reaching sexual maturity, rabbits will often exhibit behaviour that is inappropriate for children. Aggression, "mounting" your arm, and/or spraying urine to mark territory certainly isn’t favourable. Even if spayed or neutered, the surgery is expensive and could take up to two months for hormonal behavior to disappear completely.

**Veterinary & Medical Care** Rabbits need to see a rabbit-savvy vet at least once a year. They need to have their ears, eyes and teeth checked frequently, have their nails clipped, and be well-groomed to prevent hairballs from forming in their stomachs. Rabbits are very good at hiding illnesses, so a yearly check-up is a good way to get a head start treating potential problems before they become serious and/or untreatable. Classroom rabbits rarely see the inside of a vet’s office. No one is prepared to take the time to visit a vet, let alone pay for one. Because of this, teeth can become overgrown, resulting in starvation, nails can grow excessively long resulting in foot issues, and many other illnesses can develop and go unnoticed – until it is too late. Rabbits can be prone to having respiratory infections, abscesses and stomach problems all which must be treated extremely quickly.

**Home Sweet Home**

Rabbits need a place to call home. Rabbits are very social creatures and enjoy the company of a loving caregiver or another rabbit. They enjoy a quiet, family atmosphere and, when loved and respected, can display wonderful affection and devotion. This is where they are healthiest and happiest – as one of the family. Classroom rabbits never know what a home feels like. They are kept caged and isolated and often become despondent and depressed. They never know what it is like to run and hop, to feel a loving pet from a loving hand, to relax in a trusting atmosphere and enjoy being a bunny. They are often shuttled from one home to another over weekends and holidays, or they are left alone, unattended, for days at a time. Rabbit Rescue does believe that a classroom is the right place to start teaching students about having compassion towards animals and treating them with love and respect.  If your classroom of students would like to help rabbits, they can raise funds to ‘sponsor’ a rabbit of their choice, and in return they will receive a certificate and photo of the rabbit they have helped save.

To learn how you can sponsor a bunny please check out: [www.rabbitrescue.ca/donate.html](http://www.rabbitrescue.ca/donate.html) or email us at: haviva@rabbitrescue.ca