

Whatcom Humane Society

Tips and Tricks for Small Animal TLC (by volunteers for volunteers)

- 1) Rabbits and guinea pigs are prey animals, and humans are giant scary predators. Most of them will be scared of us, so one of our biggest jobs is teaching them that humans are not scary. Animals are more appealing to potential adopters if they're more social!
- 2) If you have to try multiple times to pick up an animal for cuddles or transfer to the x-pen, just give up and try another day. Chasing an animal around a cage is teaching them that humans are scary. It's best, if you do have to pick up an animal that is somewhat fearful, to pick them up confidently, preferably on the first try. Guinea pigs will often retreat to their hides, which is perfect because they are very easy to catch once they're in there!
- 3) If you have to pick up a rabbit, try not to hold it for longer than is strictly necessary. Even most well-socialized rabbits really don't like to be held.
- 4) Rabbits can kick their back feet really hard, hard enough to seriously injure themselves. Make sure you support their back end and control the back feet when you pick them up.
- 5) A rabbit that runs, jumps or kicks their back feet out (called a binky) is a happy rabbit. If a bunny stomps his/her feet or grunts, that is a sign of annoyance or agitation. Note the difference.
- 6) The easiest way to pick up a guinea pig is to slide one full hand under their belly and lift them off the ground slightly so they can no longer run. From there, quickly swaddle with the other hand to make them feel secure and pull them out of their cage.
- 7) Most guinea pigs can be held for at least a few minutes. If you're snuggling a guinea pig, pay attention to their body language. They will probably start to wiggle when they get tired of being held. If you put them back in their cage when they start to wiggle, they will have learned that being held by a human is not so scary or dangerous.
- 8) The best way to avoid getting bitten by a guinea pig is to not provide them with anything to bite. Hold them behind their front legs so there are no fingers conveniently positioned in front of their face. Make sure their behind is supported too.
- 9) Rabbits who have ground-level doors can be allowed to come into the X pen at their own pace. This is especially nice for rabbits who are really nervous about people. If you have a rabbit that's really nervous or cage-defensive, you can just set up the X pen, open the door, and wait. Sit at the far end of the X pen facing another direction and pretend to ignore the rabbit. They may come out on their own after a few minutes. Or they may not! You can also try luring them out with something interesting, like a piece of paper or a cardboard tube.
- 10) Rabbits who live on the top level sometimes respond better to being approached from above rather than through the cage door. All the cages have tops that open. Experiment with each rabbit to see what they like better, and read the volunteer notes to see if there are clues there.

- 11) Animals who have just been transferred to the X pen will probably be a little freaked out. Give them a few minutes to acclimate before you try to approach them. Just sit back and pretend to ignore them while they sniff around or what have you. Some rabbits will be super friendly and not freaked out at all! This will probably be evident in the volunteer notes. Friendly rabbits might not need a break before you approach them.
- 12) Different rabbits will have different preferences for how they are approached. Check the volunteer notes for clues on each rabbit, and make sure you make a note if you figure anything out. If a rabbit does a full-body twitch or hops away from you, they probably don't like what you're doing, or they're not comfortable enough yet to let you do that. Try something different, or just take a break and leave them alone for a minute.
- 13) Ferrets are super fun and generally easy to handle. You can grab them anywhere in their long middle part and let them climb around on you. If you want to let them down and play with them, make sure you put them in a carrier and take them over to the dog GA rooms.
- 14) Ferrets do have very, very long sharp teeth. Do NOT hold them up to your face!
- 15) Chinchillas are generally shy. Some of them will be willing to jump out of their cage and into the X pen to explore. They may or may not let you pet them or hold them.
- 16) Chinchillas can JUMP, so make sure you are using the taller x-pen. Be aware that some of them are small enough to slip through the bars of the x-pen. Watch them closely!
- 17) Chinchillas like to run and play! They sit quietly in the cages, but when given the space of a GA Room they have tons of energy. If a room is available, try it out!
- 18) Rats are usually pretty friendly. You can play with them while you hold them, or you can put one in the big exercise ball so they can explore the room while you work with other animals. Just keep an eye on the ball!
- 19) Keep your expectations reasonable for each animal. Some of the animals we house are wonderfully friendly and really crave our visits! And others don't have many positive experiences with humans at all. They all need our help, just in different ways.