



A Private Charity Since 1881

Small Animal Foster Care Training Handout

The who, what, where and when for small animals

CHS takes in many types of small animals such as rabbits, guinea pigs, ferrets, hamsters, gerbils, mice, rats and even chinchilla's. Each year, CHS, on average needs foster for 80-120 small animals. Pregnant or nursing rabbits and guinea pigs are the majority of small animals in need of foster care. The CHS foster program will provide you the appropriate housing and supplies needed to care for your small animal foster. This may include cages, exercise pens, mounted water bottle or bowl, newspaper or care fresh bedding, species appropriate toys, housing, food and hay.

Feeding of your maternity rabbit or guinea pig

Pregnant or nursing rabbit/guinea pig moms are free fed alfalfa hay that should be available to them at all times. They are also fed 1/3 of a cup of species appropriate pellet food scattered throughout their enclosure to promote foraging. Daily vegetables should also be provided for your maternity fosters. Generally speaking rabbits will receive 2 packed cups per 2 pounds body weight of kale, carrot tops, basil and or romaine. They can also receive 2 tablespoons per 2 pounds body weight of bell pepper or carrots. Guinea Pigs should receive 1 cup of carrot tops, kale, romaine lettuce, bell pepper and or carrots. Please follow any additional recommendations of the veterinary staff at time of pick up.

Nesting and caring for the nest

Prior to birthing, a doe will make a nest for her kits with their own fur. Please do not dismantle the mothers nest. Most mothers will clean the nest and only enter to feed their kits. Some mothers may lay in the nest, in this case, carefully clean out any droppings you can without disturbing the kits. In the event the mom soaks the nest with urine and the kits are at risk of getting damp, you can make a new nest with care fresh bedding, hay and any fur from the original nest that has not been soaked in urine. You should cage the doe away from her kits while you do this as she may find this upsetting.

When making a rabbits nest you should make sure the nesting box is clean and dry. Add about an inch of care fresh, a couple handfuls of alfalfa hay and then using your fist in the middle of the box, push down. Add some of the mother's fur to this "hole" or dent in the bedding and place the babies in it. Return mom to the enclosure.

Rabbit labor and delivery

Pregnant rabbits will need a quiet place to relax, a fully enclosed pen for exercise and a nesting box. CHS will provide you with an x-pen enclosure and a nesting box. Please check on your foster as often as every 3-4 hours whenever possible. Minimal handling is safest during pregnancy for both you and the rabbit. Rabbits are often uncomfortable and nesting instincts may make them defensive. Handfeeding is a wonderful way to bond with your pregnant bunny while limiting any handling. You will know when the birth is near when you foster stops eating, usually 24-48 hours prior to delivery. Birthing is normally quick, often between 15-30 minutes. If labor continues for more than one hour please contact CHS or, if after hours, bring to the emergency vet. Two to four hours after the birth you can offer mom some of her favorite food such as a strawberry. While she is eating you can count the kits and verify if they were all live born. If you find any stillborn, please remove them from the group and place in a small bag for return to CHS.



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The day after and beyond

The day after the kits are born, lure the doe away with some greens or favorite food and weigh each of the kits on the CHS provided scale. Call your foster care coordinator to report the birth, number born, weight and time/date of delivery. Your first routine recheck appointment will be scheduled at that time, typically when the kits are two weeks old. Kits should be weighed each day and their weights recorded on the foster care weight chart. Be sure to notice any particular markings of each kit to distinguish one from another. If any of the babies lose weight over the course of the foster period you must contact your foster care coordinator immediately. Kits should be handled gently and for short periods of time each day until they are 3 weeks old. Beginning at 3 weeks old you can hold them for longer periods of time while you hand feed pieces of hay and groom them. Touch their paws and ears as well as petting them lightly all over their head and torso.

Mothers only let their kits nurse once or twice per day for a few minutes at a time. The kits will nurse for 4-5 weeks. At this point, the mother's milk production will start to slow down. At about 6-7 weeks you can remove the two or 3 largest and place them in their own cage to allow the smaller kits to get some additional feeding time until they are 8 weeks old. At 8 weeks old they will be separated and returned to CHS.

Litter training your foster rabbit(s)

When you first introduce your rabbit to his or her new ex-pen, observe what corner she goes to. Once you notice what corner they are favoring, add a large plastic litter box with yesterday's news, hay and some of their droppings in the box. Be patient, litter box training takes time and effort. Rabbits will always leave some droppings outside their box, this is not due to failure to use the litter box but to mark their territory. It is normal behavior for rabbits to sometimes sleep in their litter box. Always monitor your foster rabbit during exercise time outside of their ex-pen. Some rabbits like to chew on wires and wood!

Guinea Pig Labor and Delivery

Guinea pigs are primarily sent out to foster when we suspect they are pregnant. They will need a quiet place with limited exposure to bright lights, loud noises and there should be no drafts. They should be monitored every 2-3 hours whenever possible. Limited handling is also very important to reduce stress. An early sign of labor is when the guinea pig stops eating and or drinking. Most rodents make nests for their offspring but guinea pigs do not. A clean cage is important for the pups so please clean the cage daily. Pregnant and nursing guinea pigs need two times the amount of care fresh you would normally put down for a guinea pig.

When the mother is actively giving birth please give her space and do not handle her or her newborn pups. There is typically about 5 minutes between pups and total birth should last no more than one hour. Once the birthing is over, look for things such as stress calling, extreme exhaustion, excessive bleeding (over a tablespoon of blood). If you see any of these signs please call your foster care coordinator immediately, if after hours contact the emergency clinic. Each day you should hold and weigh the pups recording their weights on the foster care weight chart. If any of the pups lose



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weight over the foster period you should notify your foster care coordinator ASAP. Pups should be held each day for short periods of time. You can hand feed them small amounts of veggies starting at one week old.

Daily Care and Cleaning for small animals

Daily care include keeping the cage/ex-pen tidy, providing fresh water and food. Keep good notes on behavior or concerns. Provide an opportunity each day for enrichment and socialization. Cages should not be disinfected while the animal is in the cage. Remove the foster pet from the cage and place in temporary housing. For rabbits, guinea pigs, ferrets and chinchillas, empty the cage and dispose of bedding and food. Rodents (rats, hamsters, gerbils, mice) should have their cage emptied once every other day. Toys if in good, clean condition can be returned to the cage once disinfected. If they are dirty soiled and can be cleaned put aside for cleaning. If destroyed or the condition is poor they can be discarded. Disinfect the cage with cleaner, wipe it clean and dry it thoroughly. Replace newspaper or care fresh bedding. Disinfect any items such as litter tray, toys, water bottle, and bowls. Rinse, dry and return them to the cage. Return the foster pet to their cage/ex-pen

Small animal feeding, handling, enrichment and exercise

Feeding

All small animals must be provided clean, fresh water at all times. They are fed a diet of species appropriate pellet food as directed by the CHS small animal foster feeding guidelines or as directed by the CHS veterinarians. Chinchilla's are also free fed timothy hay and may also be given 1-2 small pieces of carrot, blueberry, celery, apple, grape, orange or raisins. Small animal fosters must never be given seed blocks or other treats without the consent of the CHS medical team or the foster care coordinator. Sugary treats, processed or refined grains and fruits high in simple sugars are not recommended for small animals.

Handling

Approaching small animals should always include talking softly and watching their body language. Are they showing any signs of fear or aggression, do they approach you or back away? Never touch a sleeping small animal. Never force an interaction with your foster pet, do not feed them or stick your fingers through the bars of their cage. Do not stick your fingers in their mouths. Always use caution when picking up or moving your small animal foster pet, be sure to support their weight. IF your foster pet is acting aggressively do not touch them, report any aggressive behavior to your foster care coordinator. If you are bitten or scratched by your foster pet you must report the bite to your foster coordinator. Failure to do so can result in termination from the foster care program.

When handling rabbits make sure the rabbit is fully supported and feels secure when you are picking him/her up. Hold him close to your body. Do not drop the rabbit if you feel he /she is going to get loose, lower yourself to the floor prior to releasing the bun. Rabbits should never be picked up by their scruff.



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When handling Guinea pigs you should place your right hand around the guinea pig front end, avoid squeezing your right hand. Put your left hand under his/her bum. Lift up horizontally and hold your guinea pig close to your body.

When handling chinchilla's they should be held using a towel. Place your hands gently around the chinchilla's chest and lift him toward your torso. Slowly take out or place your chinchilla in its cage.

When handling other small animals never pick them up by their tail, this can cause serious injury. Let the animal approach you whenever possible. Remember that many small animals are known to nip. Lift ferrets from behind and use one hand to support his chest and one hand to cradle his hops. Hamster, gerbils and mice will approach you without fear when they are ready to be pick up and handles. Slowly cup your hands around the animal and move one hand under the pet and the other over it. Keep your hands low in the cage so that if it falls, it won't fall far.

Enrichment

All animals need enrichment but have different needs and requirements to do so. Rabbits can be offered wooden toys for chewing and tossing. Blankets and towels to burrow in, scatter food and treats under bedding to promote scavenging or offer food in a paper towel tube. Guinea pigs can have cat toys, scatter food and treats to promote scavenging. Filling a toilet paper tube with hay. All guinea pigs should have a pig-loo (Guinea pig house). Rats can have size appropriate exercise wheels, brightly colored cat or bird toys, climbing ladders and cardboard tubes for chewing and shredding. Chinchilla's like to have a dust bath, chew sticks, hay cubes, climbing ladders and closed exercise wheels. Ferrets enjoy cat toys, toilet paper tubes with food, ball pits and tunnel toys. Hamsters, gerbils and mice like exercise wheels, deep bedding for burrowing, wood sticks and toys for chewing and cardboard tubes for hiding and running through.

Exercise

Daily exercise and enrichment is an important part of fostering small animals. All small animals need some out of cage time each day for exercise. Gerbils and mice can have one hour of out of cage time in a restricted supervised location. Ferrets can have up to 3 hours out of cage time that can be spread out through the day. Chinchillas need 2 hours out of cage time each day, again this time can be split up throughout the day. Rats can have as much out of cage time as you are able to give them. Adult rabbits should have 1-2 hours of free roaming time each day. Guinea pigs should get about 1-2 hours out of cage time each day. You can split them time throughout the course of the day as needed. Adult rabbits whenever possible should have an exercise pen (ex-pen) as opposed to a cage. The pen should include a water bottle/bowl, hay tray, bun-loo (bunny house) and a litter tray.

Before returning your foster pet

Email up to 3 high quality digital photos, provide detailed information in the foster care report card and always let us know if a family member is interested in adoption. Please DO NOT promote your foster pet via social media platforms or promise anyone they can adopt your foster pet.