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Choosing the right small pet

Before deciding which small animal you give a home to, you must consider the amount of time you have to spare and what your expectations are. Here is a brief insight into the most commonly kept small animals.

Gerbils

Gerbils are fun to watch if they are living in the correct conditions. They are burrowing animals by nature and spend many hours digging for pleasure, making them much more fun to observe than to handle. Gerbils are quick and agile, and young children can find it quite difficult to hold them without squeezing too hard. If you have young children and wish them to be able to handle their pet, it may be better to choose a different species. As pets for adults, however, you will certainly find gerbils fascinating both to watch and to handle.

Hamsters

There are many different types of hamster. Only one type needs to live as a solitary animal, while all others need companions. They are by nature nocturnal animals and can become quite alarmed if disturbed in the daytime. For this reason they may be a disappointing companion for a child and may bite if disturbed from sleep (they are probably just waking up as your child is going to bed). With quite poor eyesight and easily startled by sudden movements, they make much better companions for adults than for children.

Mice

Mice are small and quick and, for this reason, may not be suitable for young children. As with all animals, there needs to be considerable parental interest as children can easily be distracted and forget the daily needs of their pets. Male mice have quite a strong smell of musk, but the females have far less smell. For this reason more attention needs to be given to the cleaning regime for males.

Rats

Rats make good companions for both adults and children, and it is very important for them to have regular social interaction and mental stimulation (they will become very miserable if left without attention and require daily contact). Consideration needs to be given to the amount of time owners are willing to give to these agreeable animals. Rats need more cage space than mice, hamsters or gerbils, and also like to have various levels on which to rest. Some pet shops do not give correct advice as to which type of cage is the best and, as a consequence, animals can sometimes spend their whole life in unsuitable accommodation. Aquariums are never suitable for rats, regardless of recommendations to the contrary.

Rats are highly intelligent and can be trained to perform simple tricks prompted by voice commands using repetition and rewarding with treats. Training requires consistency, ensuring always to use the same voice commands.

Guinea pigs

Guinea pigs can make good companions for adults and children. They are fun to watch and have a varied vocabulary. Once you get to know your animals it is possible to tell when they are happy, sad, excited or angry. They are not happy just to be left in a hutch at the bottom of the garden, but need shelter from all extremes of weather and a run to enable them to graze freely, safe from predators. It is vital that they are with another of their own kind. Gentle by nature, guinea pigs can be a good first-time companion for a child (as long as there is considerable parental involvement).

Consideration needs to be given to their fairly long lifespan, which can be up to seven years. If you are buying them for your children, please consider whether they will still be interested in seven years time. Many animals end up in rehoming centres such as The Blue Cross because children often reach an age when their priorities change.

Chinchillas

If housed and handled correctly, chinchillas make intelligent, happy and interesting companions. When you know them well and they are happy in their homes, they can be taught to do basic tricks in order to earn a treat! Consideration must be given to their long lifespan, which is approximately 15 years. It is vital to give extra thought if you are considering buying them as companions for your children – who may have grown up and left home by the time the chinchillas have reached later life.

Chinchillas are nocturnal animals, and need a very large cage plus a dust bath (this is essential for their mental and physical well-being). They are enthusiastic dust bathers and do make quite a lot of mess! Chinchillas need to live with a companion – either a female with a neutered male, or littermates of the same sex (they will usually live harmoniously as long as they have been together since birth).

As well as having a large cage for their accommodation, they need to be given exercise time out of their cage, and are responsive and lively animals.

Rabbits

Rabbits can be excellent pets for children. There are, however, many things to be considered before thinking of giving a home to these animals, especially when you have young children. Rabbits are prey animals and need to be ready to run from danger at all times. Those rabbits kept only in hutches have nowhere to feel secure, and when a child tries to lift them from the hutch, the rabbit may try to scratch, kick or bite to get away from perceived danger. Children can therefore be disappointed when they find their rabbits are not keen to be picked up and cuddled. They do make good companions for children as long as their accommodation is correct and the handling is done with sensitivity and under adult supervision.

The best kind of accommodation for rabbits when children are involved in their daily care, is a wooden Wendy house construction with an attached run area. This will give children the opportunity to sit quietly and wait for the rabbits to come to them. This way the animals will feel more confident as they will have all four feet on the ground and will be able to hop away should they wish to do so. It also means that the rabbits can still be given attention even during bad weather and the children will be able to groom them and watch them having fun. It is important that a rabbit has a companion of its own kind. Contrary to popular belief that rabbits and guinea pigs do not live happily together. They do not "speak the same language" and rabbits can sometimes inflict quite severe injuries on guinea pigs, especially in the spring.

The approximate lifespan of a rabbit is between six and eight years, therefore think carefully before taking on these animals.