



House Rabbit Network

Fostering and Living, Multiple-Species Style

By Karla Cook

I live in a multi-species household, or rather a multiple-species household. My family consists of me (the mother), my husband (the father), three boys, ages 23, 18, and 14, an elderly Cocker Spaniel who is deaf, and mostly blind from cataracts, two Italian Greyhounds, male and female, ages eight and six, Stuart the Wondercat, and foster bunnies. Our current fosters are Eskie and MoMo, a bonded pair of female Angoras, from HRN's Great Angora Rescue of last summer. Our former foster bunnies have been Edward Hopper, a young male Jersey Woolly that was destined to be euthanized by a local shelter for "cage aggression", Claude Bonet, a grey and white Mini Rex that was found wandering the streets of Lynn, Massachusetts by an animal control officer last December, and Klondike, brother of Eskie and MoMo.

Each one of these foster bunnies has been thrown into my rather chaotic life - and each one has survived a "trial by fire". I have friends who say that if an animal can thrive in my household, it will be fireproof, bullet-proof and water-proof. I am of the belief that when you take an animal into your life, it becomes part of your family; you sign a covenant with your supreme being of choice to love and care for that animal for the rest of its life. That includes sickness and health, pooping on the rug, puking on your lap, barking at the neighbor's children, stealing food off the counter, leaving dead rodents on the doorstep, and nibbling on your rug. Only animals can give you unconditional love. Only animals behave as if the sun rises and sets with you. They love you despite your short comings, and never mention your annoying habits. The four footed fur kids we invite into our homes, our lives, and our hearts are what keep us human.

So, how does one live in a multiple-species household? The first rule, and the most important, is to NEVER leave the animals (or children) unattended with each other. The most trusted of companion animals can have a bad day, and without the luxury of speech, turn on another member of their extended family with claws and teeth first. They don't have the ability to say, "I am having a bad day, just LEAVE ME ALONE!" Children are often unable to recognize the subtle body language of a fur kid that means "I would rather not be interacting at this moment in time". Being the "responsible adult" in a multiple-species household means just that: you are ever alert for the sounds that fall under "not normal". A thump, a growl, a hiss, hurried paw prints. You develop a sort of sixth sense to be able to avert disaster before it happens. All of my charges have a "safe" place. The boys have their rooms, the dogs and bunnies their crates, and the cat the basement. It is essential that everyone has a space that is theirs and theirs alone, a place where they can recharge when the outside world seems too much. This space needs to be treated with respect.

Food is a marvelous motivator! Dogs respond to the word "cookie". My foster bunnies know the sound of the refrigerator door opening, the crinkle of produce bags, and the word "treat" that

means raisins, dried blueberries, or organic banana chips. Use food to your advantage - good behavior gets rewarded, bad behavior is ignored. Learn how to speak “rabbit”. Stomp your foot if you are angry.

One of the most rewarding things about living in a multiple-species household is watching the interactions. When a dog wants to play, it does what is referred to as a “play bow - bottom up, paws front, head down. These actions to a rabbit look like an aggressive move, a lunge saying “back off.” Watching two different species trying to communicate with a common language is magical. Having your fur kids comfortable enough that they are willing to explore is truly a gift.

What is essential in a multiple-species household is a firm understanding of the communication methods of each animal with which you live. As a human, you need to be able to delve to the essence of the animals that share and enrich your life, never forgetting that you are the human, facilitating the communication process between species.

I am drawn to remember a moment last summer when I was out in the yard with the dogs. The Italian Greyhounds were on leashes, the Cockers were not. From out of the foliage came Stuart the Wondercat with a “prize” in his mouth. Very proudly he laid his prize at the feet of his canine siblings. The female Cocker looked at the body with abject disdain, the Iggies pawed the body with their cat-like feet, and Mocha, the male Cocker, sniffed and took the prize in his mouth. Unfortunately, the poor mouse was not yet dead, and seated within Mocha’s mouth, he decided to move. Mocha’s eyebrows went up, first one then the other. He had never experienced food that moved in his mouth. Finally, I told him to drop it, which he did, and Stuart took his prize off to parts unknown - but the interaction between species has remained with me. They were all interconnected, part of a family despite the differences, and willing to cross over lines that otherwise would be uncrossable. Within a family, it is love and understanding that make all things possible - and so we have human, dog, cat, and rabbit living together in a mutual respect. It doesn’t get any better than that.



Eskie and MoMo (available for adoption) receive a morning treat from their foster dad.



Claude Bonet sits and soaks up the morning sun with his “friends”.