

AEC STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURES

SOP No:	06
SOP	Rabbits
Scientific Name:	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>
Category:	2 or 3
Approval Level:	Category 2: School Principal may delegate Category 3: School Principal may NOT delegate
Authority:	Government Schools – Department for Education and Childhood Development Animal Ethics Committee Independent and Catholic Schools – Non-Government Schools Animal Ethics Committee (NGSAEC)
Authority Approval Date:	1 August 2010
Last Update:	18 December 2018
Disclaimer:	<i>This document may be updated at any time. You should check the web site regularly to ensure that you are meeting the most recent recommendations. If you note any concerns with the information provided (inadequate, incorrect) please contact the relevant AEC.</i>
Licensing Requirement:	Not applicable
Compliance Requirement:	The keeping of this species requires approval from the School Principal. It is recommended that this Standard Operating Procedure be followed as a minimum in the provision of appropriate care and housing for this species.

General Information: Approximately 50 varieties of rabbits have been developed from the original wild rabbits of Europe and now they come in many sizes and colours.

Fossils and Stone Age paintings in Spain suggest they originated in the Mediterranean and were spread to many countries by the ancient Romans who liked their meat. Queen Elizabeth raised them as pets and started a fad. They came to Australia with the first fleet, were abundant in Tasmania by 1822 and were released near Geelong in 1859 for 'sporting purposes'. Unfortunately, in the wild they are probably responsible for the extinction of some South Australian mammals. Note: it is illegal to keep wild rabbits as pets. Pet rabbits make hardy and affectionate pets living for 4 -10 years in captivity.

Rabbits can include the following varieties - white rabbits, angora longhaired varieties, lop eared rabbits and giant rabbits.

Physical Attributes:

- **Size (adult):** Varies with species
- **Weight (adult):** Varies with species from small 2kg, large 4 -6 kg and giants over 8kg
- **Life span:** Average 5-8 years
- **Sexual maturity:** Can breed from approx 3-6 months till 3 years of age. Breeding from rabbits over 6 years of age is not recommended.
- **Gestation period:** 30 days
- **Number of offspring:** 4-10 kits, up to 4 litters per year.
- **Weaning age:** 6-8 weeks

Behaviour:

- **Normal:** As social animals, rabbits prefer to live in a group of 2 or more. However, if does (females) are included only one buck can be kept in the group. They normally present with shiny coats, bright eyes and alert ears.
- **Socialisation:** If only one rabbit is kept it will need lots of attention although guinea pigs, chickens and even tortoises make suitable companions.
- **Activity levels (hibernation etc):** They will be most active in the early morning and late afternoon resting during the day.

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Environment:

- **Space:** The following cage aspects are required to provide basic housing for one or two rabbits.
 - An area of 2 sq mts with a minimum length in one direction of 2mts (3 hops)
 - Part solid and part wire base to allow grazing on lawns
 - Wire mesh bases should be woven or flat mesh with 19 x 19mm squares
 - Solid bases can include wood in hutches (remember it will get wet) or earth in outside enclosures
 - For every additional rabbit add .5 sq mts of space
 - The height must allow them to stand on their back legs with ears outstretched – minimum 500mm but preferably 900mm
 - Fully enclosed hutches to ensure protection from predators (cats, dogs, foxes, birds of prey and humans!)
 - If kept outside the hutch should be locked
 - If they have a small hutch within a larger exercise enclosure the hutch must be fully enclosed and lockable
 - Layers of bedding straw
 - Remember over-crowded hutches place undue stress on the rabbits and may lead to fighting and injury.
- **Movement:** Rabbits move by hopping and they need adequate space to hop around. If they are kept in small cages they need access to exercise pens. Such pens must ensure rabbits cannot dig out and predators cannot get in.
- **Water:** Fresh water must be provided daily through sipper bottles or water bowls.
- **Temperature:** Heat rather than cold will worry rabbits so place the cage in an airy spot preferably on the south side of a building. In hot weather, cover hutch with shade cloth or bring under verandas or inside. An effective way of cooling rabbits is to place frozen 2 litre bottles of water in the cage. In periods of cold they need sheltered, snug places to hide. Optimum temperatures are between 10-25°.
- **Ventilation:** Adequate ventilation is important to maintain healthy rabbits. They should be protected from draughts, fumes and direct sunlight. If indoors they should be kept away from direct cooling and heating appliances.
- **Lighting:** A natural source of light is essential but they should not be placed in direct hot sun outdoors or near windows and glass doors if kept indoors.
- **Covering:** There must be a cover over the hutch to protect rabbits from external harms and to prevent them from escaping. Mesh top or part solid/ part mesh are good and help with ventilation and weather exposure.
- **Shelter:** The enclosure must provide areas to shelter from the weather, retreats and hiding places “burrows”. Cardboard boxes, wooden boxes, large pipes are items that can be used. They need creative items to stimulate them – roots and twigs for gnawing, toys, straw, newspaper or peat moss for bedding and chewing. Outdoors a shade covering – shade cloth or trees, must be provided.
- **Cleaning:** As the output of urine and faeces is high cages must be cleaned at least every second day. Replacing straw and paper, cleaning out pellet and water containers and removing uneaten vegetation. Rabbits can be trained to use a litter tray lined with sawdust to absorb the urine and faeces. Hutches should be scrubbed as required but at least monthly with mild detergents only.

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Feeding:

- **Diet:** Rabbit pellets, grass hay or meadow hay, vegetables, fruit, bread, bran, oats can be fed to rabbits. Greens must be fresh and uneaten greens from previous day must be removed. If diarrhoea develops, reduce or discontinue with the greens for a while. Daily feeding and fresh water are essential. If using a dish of water, place it above the floor of the cage. Nursing mothers like milk and whole-grain bread soaked in milk. Rabbits are vegetarians, have teeth that grow rapidly and an extra long gut and special caecum to digest cellulose.
- **Daily requirements:** A small handful of fresh pellets each day (don't keep pellets for more than 60 days) and a handful selection of hay or green feed if they cannot graze on lawn areas. Pellets should make up no more than ¼ of the daily diet. Roughage (eg hay) should be at least ½ of the daily diet.
- **Supplementary feeding:** Not necessary if a balanced diet is provided however with green feed do not use cabbage or cauliflower as it causes bloating and do not give vegetables from the turnip or rhubarb family as these are toxic.
- **Equipment:** Sipper bottles and heavy feeding bowls.

Breeding:

- **Mating:** If not wanting to breed keep females together or keep a desexed male with a female. Mating occurs again following birth of a litter. Sexually mature at 5-8 months, the young doe should be introduced into the buck's hutch at 8-9 months (not vice versa as she is rather territorial). Pelvic bones harden and so it is important for a doe to have her first litter whilst young.
- **Pregnancy:** A doe's oestrus cycle is 16 days and gestation takes 30 days. For several days before and after birth it is important not to disturb the doe but she will re-mate within a day or so of birth. Fresh straw and a dry nest box is important and can be given when you notice the doe begin to pull hair away from her nipples to expose them and then use the hair to line the nest. The young must not be exposed to bright light (sensitive eyes) but can be weaned at 6-8 weeks. They will drink 1:1 water and milk and eat pellets. Baby rabbits (kits) are often only fed once a day by the mother.
- **Fate planning:** Breeding stock must be re homed. They must NEVER be released into the environment.

Handling:

- **Human:** Pick up gently but firmly with both hands one around the chest and under its front legs and one hand to support its bottom. Never pick rabbits up by their ears or back legs. Some rabbits can be picked up by the loose skin on the scruff of the neck with one hand supporting their bottom, but many do not like this and may struggle and be injured. Rabbits will not usually urinate while held but may scratch or bite if they feel insecure. Toenails may need an occasional clipping, but rabbits clean themselves regularly. Rabbits have a light bone structure and must be handled gently to avoid fractures.
- **Equipment:** Make sure they are handled in an enclosed area to avoid losing the rabbit. Difficult rabbits may be wrapped in a towel to assist with handling. Longhaired rabbits will need regular clipping and someone experienced in handling and clipping rabbits should do this.
- **Transporting:** Use small carry cages. Do not leave for long periods in heat or cold conditions. Do not transport on days that are over 32 degrees.
- **Children:** Should handle rabbits under staff supervision and petting is preferable to holding.

Hygiene:

Thoroughly wash hands with soap and running water for at least 10-15 seconds after working with or handling any animals. Dry hands with clean paper, cloth towel or air dryer. Turn off the tap with the paper towel if possible. Follow first aid procedures should a bite occur.

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Signs of illness:

Indicators:

- Bright-eyed, active rabbits with clean, shiny fur are healthy. However, if the temperature is changed rapidly, a cold can develop. Shifting quickly from a hot room to a cold outside cage can cause this. Keep a sick rabbit warm and dry and it should recover, if not take the rabbit to a veterinarian.
- Ear infections with symptoms of head shaking or ear-scratching should be treated on the advice of a veterinarian.
- Lesions, abnormal growths, diarrhoea, weight loss, hair loss, excessive scratching, limping, listless, dribbling, coughing, gasping, panting all need checking.
- Rabbit diseases are well documented and can readily be treated by a vet.

Treatments:

Assistance from a veterinarian should be sought for confirmation of conditions and treatment options.

Euthanasia:

When an illness or injury is such that recovery is unlikely then the animal must be euthanised by a veterinarian. Any death must be reported to the Animal Ethics Committee using the appropriate form (see section relating to ADVERSE EVENTS). Forms are available on the relevant websites.

Disposal/fate planning:

When no longer required rabbits must be re homed. They must NEVER be released into the environment. Bodies must be disposed of correctly in accordance with local council regulations.

Holiday and weekend care:

Rabbits generally cope with being rostered to responsible carers. They need to be checked and fed daily over weekends and holiday periods if they remain on site.

Records must be kept of 'off site' care. Cages and feeding equipment and supplies must be provided to carers, with contact details for emergencies.

Approved activities:

Observation

Resources:

www.rspca.org.au