

A Tale of Rabbitry... and ADHD

WE ARE AN ENTHUSIASTIC FAMILY with several children who have ADHD. Our experience with rabbitry began a few years ago with a sweet brown bunny named Thumper. He lived in a large hutch in our backyard that was handmade with much TLC and an engineer's precision. John spent hours with each of our kids measuring, cutting, painting and nailing until the perfect bunny condo was complete.

At the time we didn't realize the fragility of pet rabbits. (Did you know that rabbits can get so stressed or frightened that they die?) All we knew was that Kara, our six-year-old daughter, had been dreaming of a bunny of her own since she was three. It was all she'd talk about. When she couldn't sleep or was afraid, she'd pretend she was lying in a bed surrounded by pet rabbits—some brown, some white, and others spotted. This vision soothed her to sleep many, many nights, and we felt this calming effect would carry over during the day with a pet bunny of her own.

Kara couldn't contain herself. The day my husband John brought home Thumper was the happiest day of her life. She had waited for this bunny for years and now that she had one, he wouldn't be left out of her sight for a moment. She'd run home each day and bring along any one of the ten children who walked home with her from our neighborhood school. She couldn't wait to show off her new best friend. I, on the other hand, would brace myself. The neighborhood kids would look on with delight, but Kara's excitement took over. The frightened bunny would run around the cage until he was finally caught. These fight-or-flight animals were vastly different from our golden retriever who had never met a stranger. Nonetheless, Kara loved Thumper.

One day I looked in the hutch to check on Thumper's food supply to discover that he was sleeping... and wouldn't wake up. How would I tell Kara? Her beloved pet had passed, and he was so young. Maybe he was sick when we got him. Maybe a fox came and scared him. We'll never know for sure.

Some time passed, and Kara was begging for another bunny. She was a little older, and so we gave her another bunny. This one she named Chocolate. He was a sweet boy with dark fur and a less timid personality. When the kids came home from school, Chocolate would

greet them at the hutch door, begging to come out and run in the fenced area reserved for his safety.

One Saturday afternoon, I looked out my bedroom window and noticed our neighbor Tony in the backyard with his dog Gypsy on a leash. He was visiting with John who was working in the yard. Aidan, our oldest child, who adored our pets as much as his little sister, couldn't resist the opportunity to show Chocolate to Mr. Tony. Aidan held the pet in his arms as he approached Tony. The alert rabbit quickly noticed Gypsy and jumped out of Aidan's hands to flee for his life. The dog wrangled his way out of his leash and took off after his prey. Before they reached the sidewalk, Gypsy had Chocolate in his mouth and continued down the sidewalk toward Tony's home. Tony and John followed the commotion on foot while Aidan stood in the yard in disbelief, praying that his sister's beloved Chocolate would not fall victim to Gypsy.

This story ended well... at first. Gypsy ran home and dropped the unharmed rabbit at their doorstep. John picked up the bunny before any more harm could be done, and returned him to his hutch before Adam could finish his prayer. Thankfully, all was well.

Weeks later, when I went to check on Chocolate's food supply, I noticed his lifeless body lying in the cage. How would I tell the kids that Chocolate, too, had died? Why? He survived the adventure with Gypsy. What could be more frightening than that? He seemed so healthy and vibrant. It didn't seem possible that he was sick. We were learning just how fragile these little friends really were.

Years passed, yet Kara's love for bunnies prevailed. A few months before the coronavirus pandemic, Kara was gifted a young, spotted white and brown mini lop for Christmas. It is rare to see a twelve-year-old shed tears of joy, yet she did when she met her new companion. Even her nine-year-old sister was touched by this uncanny reaction.

Bodie quickly worked his way into our hearts. This one would be an indoor rabbit. We'd keep him in our now sixteen-year-old's bedroom, which had a lock. That way he'd be safe from our impulsive and often sneaky four-year-old, who shared a love for animals yet often did not recognize his own strength and was working very hard at being "gentle."

Each day brings new challenges, surprises, and stories that most people couldn't even make up. Our kids play hard, feel much, think deeply, can express themselves loudly and impulsively—but mostly love intensely.

This system worked relatively well. Once in a while the door would be left unlocked and J would sneak in to play with Bodie, but for the most part we were comfortable that our furry friend was safe and lived a stress-free life.

Once school was canceled due to the virus, the kids had more time at home, including the four-year-old, who thrived on the structure of school. Balancing part-time work with four kids at home (three of whom have an ADHD diagnosis plus an impulsive four-year-old) proved to be a challenge, though I was getting pretty good at letting the little one watch a few cartoons while I hyperfocused on my work. I was also getting pretty good at letting the kids work things out on their own and at not overreacting to the breaks and spills that occurred during my absence.

Consequently, I didn't even look up from the computer the first time our ten-year-old daughter screamed. It was the wailing that caught my attention, and when I heard her say Bodie's name and her brother's name in the same sentence, I knew it wasn't going to be good.

Running into the kitchen I found our favorite bunny's limp body in the arms of our four-year-old. No, it can't

be, I thought, and it won't be on my watch. I quickly lifted the rabbit from his arms and noticed that he was still breathing. I ran for the

car. The three older kids accompanied me as I sped down the street to the vet, Kara without shoes and I without my cell phone. Aware that there was little a vet could do for him, we held out hope. "Mom! He's still breathing! Now he moved his head!" He slowly regained consciousness.

With fluids, a little time and a lot of love, Bodie was gradually returning to himself. The ride home from the vet brought lots of theories about what had happened between Jake and Bodie in the basement. How had Bodie even gotten in the basement? Had their little brother discovered the ill bunny and then brought him upstairs for help? Or had he provoked this injury? To my delight, however, the older siblings settled on the theory that Bodie had been shocked when he hopped on a power strip in the basement, and their little brother discovered the bunny's lifeless body and brought him upstairs for help.

I had a different theory and felt guilty about thinking that the bunny had probably been frightened by the four-year-old somehow and went into shock, causing him to seize.

We now know that a bunny is not the most resilient pet for an enthusiastic family with several children who have ADHD. However, I am inspired by the loving hearts of our three older kids whose theory didn't implicate their younger brother but made him out to be a hero.

John and I grow daily by parenting our kids with ADHD. Each day brings new challenges, surprises, and stories that most people couldn't even make up. Our kids play hard, feel much, think deeply, can express themselves loudly and impulsively—but mostly love intensely. In many ways ADHD is truly a gift.

Our four-year-old now says that he's going to be a vet when he grows up (or a pirate). **A**

Brynn is a mom with more than twenty years of professional experience with kids as a children's ministries director and as an elementary, special education, and reading teacher. The synergistic effect of her personal and professional experiences was the founding of Build Life Skills, an online resource that empowers parents to raise children who happily live to their potential.

