

## **Cuy Training and Handling Plan**

Created by Wee Companions Small Animal Adoption (<http://weecompanions.org>)

& Los Angeles Guinea Pig Rescue (<http://www.laguineapigrescue.com>)

### **Introduction: What is a “cuy”?**

The cuy mejorado or “improved cuy” (referred to simply as “cuy” by rescue organizations in Southern California) was bred through natural selection from cuy criollos (standard domesticated guinea pig), by the INIEA (Institute for Investigating Experimental Agriculture) in Peru in the 1970s through early 2000s. This commercial breed was designed as a meat source to help address poverty and hunger in regions where no other livestock or large agriculture could be developed. More information can be found here, (<http://weecompanions.org/-cuy--information>).

Broadly speaking, the cuy criollos mejorados are selected to be larger, more muscular, with rectangular bodies, and fast growth rates. In addition to their increased size, cuys tend to be extremely nervous. Due to their bulk and strength handling them can be much more difficult, especially when scared. They are capable of jumping out of open topped cages, move quickly, and are very difficult to catch and securely hold. Once caught, they often struggle, kick, and squeal loudly in an attempt to get away. They do best in an experienced adult home.

Although cuys can live with standard-sized guinea pigs, it seems that an increasing number of young cuy have social difficulties and can be very dominant, even the sows. Having the boars neutered by an experienced exotics veterinarian has helped them become more receptive to handling. A neutered boar has more options for bonding with other guinea pigs. Cuys also have impressive appetites and tend to have shorter lifespans than standard guinea pigs.

Some cuys are calm and easygoing. We believe this is due to extensive handling from a very young age through adulthood, however this seems to be more the exception than the rule for both male and female cuys.

### **CUY TRAINING PLAN developed by Saskia Chiesa of Los Angeles Guinea Pig Rescue**

The instinct to run away from any threat, even human hands, is very strong in cuys! They are very muscular, strong, and agile, blindly leaping over and under obstacles with increasing speed as they are pursued. Their environment needs to be structured so that contact can be made while they are standing still and calm. The goal is for the cuy to develop trust so they learn human touch isn't frightening, and can even be pleasant. Routine, schedule, and consistency are also very important to cuys. They make the best progress when they know what to expect. It is also best to house one individual, per cage, during the whole training period.

For the first weeks of the training program, a small cage with secure top and limited door size works best. Cuys progress faster, with less regression, by avoiding picking them up out of the cage until they are to Stage 3 of the training. The training plan is difficult to conduct in a shelter setting, so having foster homes trained to work with them would be best.

The best results have been obtained using a cage with a partition that can be closed to isolate the cuy on one side, or the other, without picking him up. This partition allows the cage to be thoroughly cleaned without lifting the cuy or removing him from the cage. This helps to keep the training steps “pure.” During the first couple weeks, close the partition during the brief training sessions, to limit the flight area. Reopen the partition as soon as training session is finished. We will refer to our training cuy as a male, but the plan is used for both males and females.

## **STAGES OF THE PLAN**

### **Stage 1 – Establishing Trust:**

Reach in through door, placing your whole hand onto the floor of the cage, while blocking door with your body to prevent him charging out. Hold it there without attempting to touch him, for approx. 15 – 30 seconds. If he runs, keep hand in place until a few seconds AFTER he stops, then end this session. To end the session, establish a routine by saying a phrase to him in a calm tone (“Good job”, “all done”, “mama loves you”, or whatever phrase you choose), open partition, set a small treat in cage (sliver of carrot, stem of cilantro, small piece of lettuce), close door, and walk away. Repeat twice daily for 5-7 days. This will help him learn your hand in cage is not a threat and he gets a treat.

Next session, once your hand is on cage floor, reach toward him slowly, aiming to pet on top of head. He will run, and stop, run and stop, and eventually stop long enough for you to reach him. As he is running or jumping over your arm, calmly talk to him, tell them to choose a spot, say his name, etc. Once he does stop, pet on top of head briefly (5 seconds the first time), then end the session.

End the session while he is still standing in one spot, even if it is up against the side of the cage. You want to finish session while they are able to hold still and “listen”. If he breaks from position to run again, wait for him to stop, and pet for a bit less time than the previous amount. A calm ending to the session is ESSENTIAL. Use your ending phrase, give treat, and walk away.

Repeat this 2 times per day minimum, 3 or 4 times per day may speed progress. Perform the training sessions at approximately the same times each day. Gradually increase the amount of time petting him, and increase the areas of the body you touch. After he can consistently allow the top of his head to be touched, progress on to ears, cheek, shoulders, back, side, and eventually rump. It is imperative that the cuy sets the pace. IF you try to increase the length of time or area of petting, and he breaks position and runs, you have taken a bigger step than he can handle. Keep your hand in the cage, wait until he stops again, back up to previous successful time or location on body. Back to just a second or two of calm, touch head, and finish on that positive touch. If he does break position, stay at the same level (by time or area) for the next several sessions, until you try increasing again.

Usually within 5 – 7 days, he will anticipate being petted when you come to the cage. He may run to the spot where he has previously held still for you to touch him, and wait for your hand. Consistent training sessions will build trust. As he learns to relax while being touched, you will see less panic in his eyes. When you see him partially close his eyes as he enjoys your touch, be encouraged he is making good progress. Each animal makes progress at his own pace, so the length of this stage of training can vary from weeks to months.

After you can pet the length of his body, and have increased the duration of petting time, without him breaking position, it is time to start touching him on his side and the edge of his tummy.

### **Stage 2 – Preparing for Handling:**

After you have worked through your areas of petting, pause with your hand on his back and slide your thumb along his side, down toward his stomach/tummy. Just hold it there briefly, then slide it back up to pet his back and finish the session. Gradually increase the amount of time your thumb is touching the edge of his tummy, then slide thumb or fingers under tummy and hold still. Remember that IF he breaks from position, you wait until he stops and back up a step to the last successful amount of time or location of petting, then end session.

Continue to extend the time of holding your thumb under his tummy and even stroking his tummy. Once a cuy is used to your thumb or fingers on their tummy, they may raise their tummy in anticipation of your touch. This means you are almost to Stage 3, when you will finally pick him up and out of the cage. Don't rush this step! You want him solidly capable of holding still and calm for petting down the length of his body, having his head and ears rubbed, and maybe even a cheek, and to lift his tummy as you slide your thumb under his middle section and hold it there.

### **Stage 3 – Safe Handling:**

After working, and patiently waiting for this step, it is time to pick up the cuy securely and remove him from the cage. You begin the same as every session, he stands still, you proceed to pet him a couple minutes as usual, slide thumb under tummy and bring your other hand in to grasp him in both hands while lifting him. Do not bring him toward cage door unless you have a good grip on him. He may struggle, and even squeal loudly, but calmly and confidently remove him from the cage, and hold him securely against your body. IF he bolts from your hands before you can get near the cage door with him, you go back to previous stage for a few sessions.

**IMPORTANT:** Do NOT end a training session with him successfully running away from you. If he gets away from your grip, but is safely in the cage, keep your hands there and wait for him to stop and settle. Pet him on the head, rub ears, maybe part of his back, and STOP. End the session on that success, and your terms, say your ending phrase (“good job”, “all done”), and give him a treat. For the next several sessions, do NOT attempt to pick him up. Go back to Stage 2 skills and practice them, end sessions with success. After a couple of days, try to move to Stage 3 again. When you do attempt to pick him up, try to make it swift and sure.

If possible, sit with him for a while, holding him and talking to him. Keep your hands on him at all times. A “tamed” cuy can still startle and launch off your lap or out of your hands in a blind panic. Again, remember routine, routine, routine. Hold him, and sit in the same spot each session. He will become more relaxed over time and anticipate these times with you, often making happy, soft, little squeaky sounds and closing their eyes as you rub his head. Be sure to have a secure hold on him as you move to place him back in his cage. This step is very important because once you get close to the cage he may struggle and will want to jump out of your arms. You place him all the way inside onto the cage floor, keeping your hands securely around him until he stops struggling and holds still. Once still, you release your hands. He will learn his stillness will be rewarded by being released. End the session with your phrase and give him a treat.

Continue to lengthen the time of sessions, and most importantly, CONTINUE the twice daily sessions of reaching in to pet them and talk to him. You don't have to pick him up every time, but just check in with him, and consistently reinforce your efforts. Some cuys will never become calm lap piggies, BUT the training is a huge benefit! They become more comfortable with people nearby, and have less panic in their eyes. They can be wonderful pets!

### **COMBINED LEARNED RESCUE HANDLING HINTS FOR CUYS (Cuy Criollos Mejorados):**

For the times when you MUST handle a cuy for cage cleaning, to administer medication, trim nails, or whatever is needed, there are ways to make it less stressful for you and the cuy.

1. To create a confined space within the cage, use an igloo, or upside down cardboard box with large doorway cut in it, a cozy sack, or even a towel to cover them as you reach to pick them up.
2. DO NOT LEAVE THE CAGE DOOR OPEN. When you have it open, you need to block the path with your body. If you must turn away or move, close and LATCH the door.
3. Reach and pick up without chasing them, if possible. Once they are in flight mode, it escalates to jumping, slamming into walls, and they can hurt themselves. When chased, cuys can suffer a heart attack and die from the stress of being pursued. Cuys, like all guinea pigs, are susceptible to heat stroke even in moderate temperatures. When you reach in the cage, your goal is to successfully lift the animal securely, the FIRST time. This is why an igloo, cozy sack, or hut is helpful.
4. After picking the cuy up, clamp him firmly against your body. You need to be sure you have a good grip with both hands, especially since he will likely be struggling and squealing. Do not let his verbal protesting intimidate you. The firm grip surrounding as much of his body as possible will help him to feel secure and stop struggling. When he does stop struggling, DO NOT assume he has calmed down. He is looking for an escape route and a chance to launch out of your arms, or startle you into letting go. Cuys do not land well since they have roughly the "same aerodynamics as a potato," with short breakable legs, and long faces with incisors which can easily break off down to the roots. Secure handling will protect them from trauma. A towel over his head may help during nail trims. Put him into a secure latched carrier to wait while you clean cage. Remember, cuys can easily jump 15 inches, and there are reports of them jumping 2 feet or more.
5. Fortunately, cuys are not prone to bite people, though it has occurred on rare occasions.
6. When placing him back into the cage, cover his eyes as you get close to the cage to prevent him leaping and risking a fall or crashing into the cage outer wall. Place onto cage floor, and hold him until still, then release.