

Rabbit Behavior

RABBIT BEHAVIOR is motivated by:

1. their need and inclination to chew and dig
2. their need to communicate
3. the hierarchical social structure rabbits

BASICS

Your bunny should have a home of her own within the family home that is large enough for a litterbox, food dishes, toys, and bunny. An exercise pen is perfect—inexpensive, easy to keep clean, and flexible so it can fit in many kinds of spaces. The more you play with and pet your bunny, the more affectionate and sociable your bunny will be. Pet your bunny every time you go by his ex-pen. Sit with your bunny while you are watching TV or videos. **Your goal is a free-roaming bunny with the ex-pen stored in the garage.**

AGE AND BEHAVIOR

Young rabbits have more energy and more need to explore than older rabbits. Young rabbits love to chew. Rabbits chew to wear down their teeth, which grow continuously, but they chew non-food items because they need to explore the world through taste and texture, they need to build strong jaw muscles, and just because it's fun. Older rabbits chew less because they know the taste and texture of the world and need only food to keep their teeth worn-down and their jaws strong.

CHEWING AND DIGGING

During the training time, concentrate on the rabbit. Watch her carefully while she is out of her exercise pen. If she starts to chew on something you don't want chewed, immediately offer her other things that are okay to chew. Block whatever she was chewing so it ceases to be a temptation (block it well, so you aren't simply challenging the rabbit to break through).

Provide something with a similar (or better) taste and texture to what is being chewed: a piece of untreated, unfinished baseboard attached with Velcro onto the real baseboard; a piece of scrap carpet instead of the real carpet (as long as the rabbit isn't ingesting the pieces she pulls out); a piece of apple branch instead of chair legs.

If the rabbit loves to dig in the carpet, build a small "corner" or "tunnel" with carpeting on the bottom (frequently replaced). Or put shredded paper or hay in a large covered litter box for bunny to dig in.

COMMUNICATING WITHOUT WORDS

Rabbits need to communicate with their companion humans, but their communication is without words. One obvious example of such communication is struggling when they are picked up. The bunny is saying "I don't like being picked up! Put me down!"

If you want a rabbit who enjoys jumping on your lap and being stroked, teach him to trust you by never grabbing or holding him against his will when he comes to you. Use nose-to-nose-touching, chin-rubbing (your chin on the rabbit's face), rubbing around the ears, etc.—whatever he enjoys—to encourage his pleasure in being with you. And if he happens not to enjoy such activities, so be it. Respect and enjoy him for who he is.

When a rabbit nips in an effort to communicate, he probably doesn't realize how painful it is, nor how severe the resulting bruise may be. SCREECH one high, loud, sudden, and short screech to let the rabbit know that he really hurt you. The squeal should be loud, sudden, and high enough to startle the rabbit slightly. (Note: use ice on the bruise quickly.)

BEHAVIOR MOTIVATED BY SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Finally, we come to behavior motivated by the fact that any rabbit wants to be top rabbit. Such behaviors have nothing to do with the chewing, digging, litter training, or nipping discussed above, but they can be confused with some of these. **Keep in mind that your goal is to convince your companion rabbit that you are top rabbit.** It is an important part of establishing a normal relationship (he will be quite content accepting you as top rabbit and himself as subdominant, once he sees you as naturally dominant).

If a rabbit jumps onto the couch where you are sitting and nips you deliberately, she is probably trying to take the couch for her own. Screech and firmly (though gently), return her to the floor with a sharp "No!" If she jumps back up and doesn't nip you, she's learned that she can share the couch. If she jumps back up and nips again, you repeat the screech, the "No!" and the return to the floor. If she comes back a third time with a nip, it is time for her to be taken back to her "exercise pen" for a two-minute time-out.

If she throws a temper tantrum in the ex-pen, shaking the "bars" and flinging herself around, ignore her. After she's quiet again, she can come out. If she continues to try to force you from your seat, she may need to stay in her ex-pen until the next time she would normally be allowed out. This same general method applies whenever a rabbit attempts to dominate you. She will be much happier when she learns that you are top rabbit and she isn't.

Another behavior related to this attempt to dominate is urinating on the piece of furniture where you often sit, or on your bed. This is the equivalent of one rabbit urinating in another rabbit's home space. You can close the door to your bedroom, controlling his access to the bed and/or put a waterproof cloth over your bedspread (you're dominant). It may not be so simple to close off a chair or couch in the family room you share with your companions.

One effective means to declare dominance in this situation is to set "Snappy Trainers" (safe, mouse-trap-like contraptions that can be found in pet stores, each with a plastic fan blade that causes it to fly into the air when bumped) along the edge of the seat. The rabbit jumps onto the seat, the Snappy Trainers fly into the air, and a startled rabbit never tries to go on that piece of furniture again. Or

buy a piece a crinkly material sold in pet stores to teach rabbits not to jump on the couch.

SUMMARY

Training a companion rabbit requires commitment of time, effort, and thought. Learn to understand your bunny's likes and dislikes, work to provide things he really enjoys, think up new possibilities when old toys become boring. Train well and carefully, love with all your heart, and experience the great pleasure of sharing your lives with each other in harmony. Enjoy your bunny!