

# HOUSE RABBIT BEHAVIOR

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It is easier to train rabbits if you understand that their behavior is usually motivated by one of three things:

- 🐾 their natural need and inclination to chew and dig;
- 🐾 their need to communicate and our tendency to require words for understanding communication; and
- 🐾 the social structure as seen by rabbits, in which all members of the family relate to them by way of a pecking (nipping?) order.

## Litterbox Training

By nature, rabbits choose one or a few places, usually corners, to deposit their urine and most of their droppings, also known as pills. Urine training involves little more than putting a clean litterbox in the corner where the rabbit chooses to go. Pill training requires only that you give the rabbit a place that will not be invaded by others.

Here are some suggestions to help you to train your rabbit to use the litterbox:

Start with a litterbox in his cage and one or more boxes in the rabbit's running space. If he urinates in a corner of the cage not containing the box, move the box to that corner until he gets it right. Don't be concerned if your bunny curls up in his litterbox - this is natural. Once he's using the litterbox in the cage, open the door and allow him into his running space. Watch him go in and out on his own. If he heads to a corner where there's no box or lifts up his tail in the characteristic fashion, cry "no" in a single, sharp burst of sound, then gently herd his back to the cage and litterbox, or into one of the boxes in his room.

Be careful, however. You don't want to make the cage or the litterbox seem like punishment. A handful of hay in the box makes it a more welcoming place. After he first uses the box, praise him and give him a favorite treat. Once he uses the litterbox in his room a couple of times, you're well on your way, as his habits will be on their way to forming.

As your rabbit gets better trained in his first room, you can increase his space. Don't hurry this process - go slow. And if the area becomes very big or includes a second floor, be sure to include more litterboxes, so as not to confuse him. Remember, as he becomes more confident and uses fewer boxes, you can start to remove some of his early .training. boxes. Get your rabbit into a daily routine and try not to vary it. Rabbits are very habitual and once a routine is established, they usually prefer to stick with it.

## Marking

All rabbits will drop pills around their cages to mark them as their own. This is not failure to be litterbox trained. It is very important for your rabbit to identify the cage as his property, so that when he leaves the cage for the bigger world of your house, he will distinguish the family's area from his own and avoid marking it. To encourage this, make the rabbit the king of his cage. Try not to

force him in or out of it - instead, coax him. Do not do things to his cage that he doesn't like and do not do things to him that he doesn't like, such as giving medicine, while he's in the cage.

The trick to getting the rabbit to keep his pills in the cage is to give him ownership of his cage - respect the cage as his:

- 🐾 Don't reach into the cage to take him out; open the door and let him come out if and when he wants to come;
- 🐾 Don't catch him and put him back in the cage or it will be his prison, not his home. Herd him back gently and let him choose to go in to get away from you. Tip: Try walking behind your rabbit, clapping your hands and saying, .bedtime.. The rabbit will learn that this annoying human behavior will not stop until he goes into his cage and over time, it'll become a regular part of his routine - unless he feels that he hasn't gotten his fair share of time outside the cage.
- 🐾 It's a bit like a child going home and closing the door because someone is calling her names. They may make the playground an unpleasant place for her, but they can't bother her in her own home.
- 🐾 If the rabbit has been snuggling with you, it's okay to carry him to the door of the cage and let him go in. Just don't put him directly into the cage, and never chase and trap him to put him in the cage.
- 🐾 Don't reach into the cage to get food dishes. Anchor them near the door of the cage so they can be filled with a minimum of trespassing into the cage, or wait until the rabbit is out to fill them.
- 🐾 Don't clean the cage while the rabbit is in it. Always wait until he comes out. He'll come over and supervise you, even help you move things around that you've set down outside the cage, but as long as he isn't in the cage, he won't see your cleaning as an invasion of his territory.

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The same technique can be used if a rabbit doesn't live in a cage, but in a particular part of a room. Mark the territory with a rug, tape, whatever and don't trespass over that.

### **Communication**

Rabbits are often misinterpreted. They are usually silent pets with subtler body language. One of the most common myths is that the rabbit is timid. This misconception stems from the rabbit's instinctive reaction to noises and fast movements. This behavior is a survival trait common to most bunnies. Rabbits have a language all their own and here are some tips to help you interpret your bunnies hops, kicks and grunts:

Affection - Rabbits often exhibit affection by licking, rubbing noses, nuzzling or cuddling.

Anger - Snorting or growling is a sign of acute anger and may be followed by a rush or attack. This type of behavior is seen in rabbits that are defending their property/territory or rabbits that are being mishandled.

Annoyance - An annoyed rabbit may throw objects around as an act of rebellion. Some rabbits will regularly toss objects about their hutches when scolded or forced to do something that they do not like. Sniffing loudly is a mild protest exhibited by some rabbits when they are picked up

Begging - Rabbits are worse than dogs about begging, especially for sweets. Beware of giving your rabbit treats, as overweight rabbits are not as healthy as trim rabbits.

Chewing - Rabbits must chew to wear down their teeth, which grow continuously. However, rabbits may also chew if stressed or bored. Bitter Apple deterrent spray can be used to train the rabbit not to chew on dangerous (wires) or valuable items

Chinning - Chinning is a rabbit's way of claiming property. Their chins contain scent glands, so they rub their chins on items to indicate that they belong to them, the same as a cat rubbing its forehead on people and objects.

Circling your feet - Usually indicates sexual behavior. He or she is in love.

Contentment - Rabbits will often grind their teeth when content or may roll over on their back or side.

Dancing and hopping - A sign of pure joy and happiness is the rabbit happy dance during which bunnies commonly kick their feet out while running and hopping in the air.

Digging - Rabbits love to burrow. They will also dig before rolling.

Don't touch my stuff - Rabbits often are displeased when you rearrange their cage as you clean. They are creatures of habit and when they get things just right, they like them to remain that way.

Erect tail - Rabbits will hold their tails erect if they are angry or anticipating mating. Some pets will also do this if they are expecting treats.

False pregnancy - Usually just intact females will build a nest and pull out hair from their chest and stomach to line the nest. They may even stop eating as rabbits do the day before they give birth.

Grunting - Usually angry, watch out or you could get bit!

Honking - This is a courting sound of males and females in heat. Sometimes, the rabbit will honk while running circles around a person or animal and this usually means it is asking for food or attention.

Napping - Rabbits are crepuscular, which means that in the wild, they are active in the early morning and evening. Rabbits often exhibit a period of sleepiness during the day and may prefer to be left alone during this naptime.

Nudging - This means pet me or get out of my way.

Playing - Rabbits like to push or toss objects around. They may also race madly around the house, jump on and off the couch and act like a kid that's had too much sugar.

Screaming - A screaming rabbit is usually in pain or terrified.

Shrill screaming - Severely injured or dying.

Sniffing - May be annoyed or just talking to you.

Spraying - Males that are not neutered will mark female rabbits in this manner, as well as their territory. Intact females will also spray.

Stomping - He's frightened, mad or trying to tell you that there's danger (in his opinion).

Tail twitching - Rabbits twitch or jerk their tails when spraying or as an act of defiance. Some rabbits will jerk their tails when they are being scolded.

Teeth grinding - Indicates contentment, like a cats purr. Loud grinding can indicate pain

Territorial droppings - Droppings that are not in a pile, but are scattered, are signs that this territory belongs to the rabbit. This will often occur upon entering a new environment. If another rabbit lives in the same house this may always be a nuisance

Thumping - Thumping is a danger signal, but can also be an announcement letting you know that they are there.

### **Aggression**

People are often shocked the first time they see a rabbit display anger. Bunnies, after all, are supposed to be timid and sweet, not outspoken and nasty, and the sudden appearance of sharp teeth

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and raking claws can be disarming. But whether your rabbit is nipping the hand that feeds him, chasing you across the room or latching his teeth into your calf, it's not unusual and it's not hopeless.

In fact, working with an aggressive rabbit can be extremely rewarding. Aggressive rabbits are often very intelligent animals who are just trying to express themselves. Once they're given some respect and some ground rules, that expression can turn into boundless energy, enthusiasm and affection.

Aggressive rabbits can be scary. Rabbits bite hard, kick hard and move fast, so it's not unusual for owners to get intimidated or start dreaming of finding bun another home. So before you even approach unhappy bun, convince yourself of the following principles:

1. Rabbits aren't born mean. Ninety-nine percent of aggressive rabbits have a behavioral problem, not a genetic one. Behavior can be changed, so give your bunny a chance.
2. Your rabbit doesn't hate you. There may be a slight chance that bun has taken a personal dislike to one person, but more likely, she's afraid you're going to hurt her. Nevertheless...
3. You're the only one who can solve the problem. Bun won't wake up one day and say, "Gee, maybe I should be nicer to Jane." It's the humans who have to figure out what's wrong and initiate new ways of interacting.
4. You cannot hit a rabbit. Some people try to teach their bunnies not to bite by swatting their noses or even hitting them with newspapers; however, this will only

aggravate the problem. You need to reassure your rabbit that her environment is safe.

Now solve the problem. Start playing detective. Watch your bun closely to see what provokes him. It may be your touching anything in his view. It may be the movement of your legs when you walk. It may be a certain sound, like a rattling newspaper or the vacuum cleaner. It may be your reaching out to touch him or feed him. Whatever it is, don't do it. He needs to learn that you're not out to get him.

Then turn on the charm because affection works wonders on psycho bunnies. Try acting like he's the greatest thing that ever happened in your life. Give him a big hello when you see him. Greet his every act of aggression with good humor too. When he charges your arm, say "why hello, you little pumpkin!" while calmly removing your arm from his reach. If he growls and thumps, say, "yes, you're a BIG rabbit --I love that about you!" If he streaks across the room with murder in his eyes, simply say, "Hey buddy, are you coming to see me?"

You can ruffle his fur, sing a little song, say a little prayer, whatever it takes to greet his bad temper with joy, affection and calm. It takes courage, but if you have gloves and shoes on, you're safe.

Rabbits think in patterns; your job is to change the pattern, so he realizes that his approach provokes affection from you, not harm. Eventually he'll associate you with kind words, nice pats and enthusiasm for his particular personality.

Your bunny probably won't change overnight. It can take weeks for a rabbit to learn to trust, but that's what's so rewarding, and so moving, about helping aggressive rabbits. You're not just changing his behavior; you're changing his perception of the world and as you do so, you'll alleviate a lot of his suffering.

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