

Training Your Rabbit

by Nancy LaRoche

Basics of Rabbit Behavior

Rabbit behavior is usually motivated by one of three things:

- their natural need and inclination to chew and dig;
- their need to communicate in non-verbal ways;
- the social structure as seen by rabbits, in which all members of the family relate to them by way of a “pecking order.”

Preparation

Rabbits should have a home of their own within the family home, large enough for a litter box, food dishes, toys, and them. They should be able to stretch full-length in all directions. Ideally, a shelf is provided to give opportunity for vertical jumps. Rabbits can be kept in such a home full time except for times of *supervised* outdoor romps (within a restricted area or single room) and the 30 minutes of training they should have daily. As they become well-trained within this restricted area, you can gradually increase their boundaries and their free time.

Never attempt to use training alone to keep a rabbit from household hazards. Toxic house plants and electrical wires should be impossible for a rabbit to reach. Counting on training or “the way he’s always behaved” with respect to such things is asking for an accident that could leave your rabbit injured or dead.

Chewing and Digging

During the training time, do nothing but concentrate on the rabbit. Open the door to her home and let her (or them) come out when she chooses. You may offer toys or treats from your hand, but don’t interfere with her if she wants to explore. Watch her carefully throughout the time she is out of her cage. If she starts to chew on something you don’t want chewed, immediately offer her as many other things that are okay to chew on as you can. Block whatever she was chewing on so it ceases to be a temptation (block it well, so you aren’t simply challenging her to break through).

If possible, provide something with a similar (or better) taste and texture to what is being chewed. For example, a piece of untreated, unfinished baseboard instead of the real baseboard; or a piece of scrap carpet instead of the real carpet (as long as the rabbit isn’t ingesting the pieces she pulls out); or

a piece of apple branch instead of chair legs.

The same thing applies to digging. If the rabbit loves to dig in the carpet, build a small “corner” with carpeting on the bottom and give this to her to distract her. A cardboard box filled with shredded newspaper can be a good distractor as well.

Age is a factor in these behaviors. Like puppies, young rabbits have more energy, more of a desire to explore and chew, and a shorter attention span than older bunnies. Be patient with your youngster.

Communicating Without Words

Rabbits are excellent non-verbal communicators. One example of such communication is struggling when he is being picked up. This is simply saying “I don’t like being picked up! PLEASE put me down! I don’t feel safe when you take control of my body this way!” There are a few instances where it is appropriate for you to take charge of your rabbit. If his teeth must be examined or clipped because of malocclusion, it is necessary to hold him against his will.

However, if you want a rabbit who enjoys jumping on your lap and being stroked, it is better to teach him to trust you by not grabbing or holding him against his will when he comes to you. Use treats, 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. After all, you want the same for yourself.

A rabbit who enjoys sitting on your lap and being stroked may nip you sharply if you get distracted enough to stop stroking her. She isn’t trying to hurt you, just reminding you that she expects you to get back to the job at hand. When a rabbit nips in an effort to communicate *appropriately* (such as in this case), she 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 she really hurt you. The squeal should be loud, sudden, and high enough to startle her slightly. The next time she nips, you will be surprised at how much gentler it will be. Continue to squeal when nipped, however, until the nip is gentle enough to cause no pain or bruising.

Who’s the Boss?

Your goal is to convince your rabbit that you are “top-rabbit.” This is not the same thing as forcing your will on him in a manner that ignores his needs and desires. Rather, it is an important part of establishing a relationship that will meet his needs as well as yours (he will be quite content accepting you as top-rabbit and himself as subordinate to you, once he sees you as naturally dominant). It even makes it possible for you to carry out your full function as his caretaker.

If your rabbit jumps onto the couch where you are sitting and nips you deliberately, he is probably trying to take the couch for his own. (This is *inappropriate* nipping.) Not only should you screech, but you should firmly (though gently), return him to the floor with a sharp “No!” If he jumps back up and doesn’t nip you, he’s learned that he can share the couch, but not drive you off. If he jumps back up and nips again, you repeat the screech, the “No!” and the return to the floor. If he comes back a third time with a nip, it is time for him to “go to his room” (i.e., he needs to be herded back to his cage for a two-minute time-out). If he throws a temper tantrum in the cage, shaking the “bars” and flinging himself around, ignore him. After he’s quiet again, he can come out. If he continues to try to force you from your seat, however, he may need to stay in his cage until the next time he would normally be allowed out. This same general method applies whenever a rabbit attempts to dominate you.

Summary

Training your rabbit requires commitment of time, effort, and thought. It isn’t just teaching the word “No!” (which will only teach the rabbit to wait until you aren’t looking). It’s learning to understand your rabbit’s likes and dislikes, working to provide things he really enjoys, thinking up new possibilities when old toys become boring, and making the effort to switch toys regularly to maintain interest.

Enjoy your rabbits to the fullest! Train them well and carefully, love them with all your heart, appreciate them for who and what they are, and you will experience the great pleasure of sharing your lives with each other in harmony.