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ANIMAL RESCUE LEAGUE OF IOWA, INC.

## *Rabbits: An Overview*

### **Basics of Rabbit Behavior**

*Information from the House Rabbit Society web page, [www.rabbit.org](http://www.rabbit.org). Primary author: Nancy LaRoche*

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

1. their natural need and inclination to chew and dig;
2. their need to communicate and our tendency to require words for understanding communications; and
3. the social structure as seen by rabbits, in which all members of the family relate to them by way of a pecking order.

### **Age and Behavior**

Young rabbits tend to have more energy and more need to explore than older rabbits have, but like all living things, rabbits have their own individual personalities. Like puppies, young rabbits love to chew. Like older dogs, rabbits may still enjoy chewing, but not to the extent they did when young. Rabbits 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. In addition, a very important aspect of chewing is to keep the teeth of the rabbit worn down. Perhaps 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. In any case, time is on your side when it comes to a rabbit's inclination to chew your great-aunt's antique buffet. On the other hand, training does not happen by itself or simply with time.

For the companions in a family to live in harmony, a companion (human) must be committed to giving time and effort to the companion (animals) of the family. If you aren't able or willing to commit to a minimum of 30 minutes a day of concentrated training, until the desired results have been achieved, you shouldn't bring companion (animals) into your home.



### **Preparation**

Rabbits should have a home of their own (called a "cage") 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" or "loft" is provided to give an opportunity for vertical jumps.

With such a home, and hopefully, with companionship of another rabbit, rabbits can be kept in their homes full time except for times of supervised out of cage romps and the 30 minutes (or more) of training they should have daily. In addition to restricting the time in which they are out to those times when you can watch them with your full attention, you want to restrict the space they have access to. As they become well trained within a restricted area, you can gradually increase their boundaries.

A wonderful "home" for your rabbit is a wire dog crate. They can be purchased of a large size and are open enough on the sides for the rabbit to see out and be more a part of the family even when they are confined to their "home."



Finally, never attempt to use training alone to keep a rabbit from something that can cause harm or death. Toxic houseplants and electrical wires should be impossible for a rabbit to reach. Counting on training or "the way she's always behaved" with respect to such things is asking for an accident that could leave you deeply grief-stricken and your rabbit in terrible pain or even dead.

### **Chewing and Digging**

During the training time, do nothing but concentrate on the rabbit. Open the door to his home and let him (or them) come out when he chooses. You may offer toys or treats from your hand, but don't interfere with him if he wants to explore. Watch him carefully throughout the time he is out of the cage. If the rabbit starts to chew on something you don't want chewed, immediately offer him as many other things that are okay to chew on as you can. Block whatever he was chewing on so it ceases to be a temptation (block it well, so you aren't simply challenging the rabbit 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 (screwed into something so it doesn't move) 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 he pulls out); or a piece of apple branch instead of chair legs.

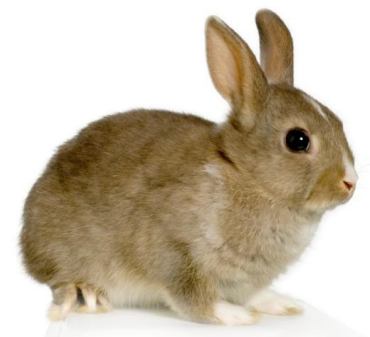
The same thing applies to digging. If the rabbit loves to dig in the carpet, build a small "corner" or "tunnel" with carpeting on the bottom (frequently replaced) and give this to him to distract him. Or make a digging box by blocking the end opening of a covered litter box and cutting a hole in the side. The rabbit will go in, turn so his body runs the length of the box (providing he is large enough that his body doesn't fit cross-wise). The digging material will be flung against the sealed end of the litter box and remain contained. Use something totally

dust-free and safe in the digging box. Rabbits, being the incredibly intelligent little creatures they are, quickly learn.

### **Communicating Without Words**

Rabbits need to communicate with their companions (humans), but of course, their communication is without words. One obvious example of such communication is struggling when they are picked up. This is simply (and obviously) saying, "I don't like being picked up! Put me down! I don't feel safe when you take control of my body this way!" There are few instances when it is appropriate for companion (humans) to force their will on a companion of another species in this way. Obviously, if a rabbit's teeth must be examined or clipped because of malocclusion, it is necessary to hold him against his will. But be careful not to force your rabbit to be picked up and held if he is uncomfortable with it.

If you want a rabbit that 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 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 him. He isn't trying to hurt you, just to remind you that he 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, he probably doesn't realize how painful it is or 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. The next time he nips (appropriately - i.e. for the purpose of communicating), 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. (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. Throughout this discussion, keep in mind that your goal is to convince your companion (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 normal companion-companion relationship that will meet his needs as well as yours (he will be quite content accepting you

as top-rabbit and himself as subdominant 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 a 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 (but 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 carried 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 room (cage) until the next time he would normally be allowed out. This same general method applies whenever a rabbit attempts to dominate you. He will be much happier when he learns that his companion (humans) is top-rabbit and he isn't.



Another behavior related to this attempt to dominate companion (human) is the most unwelcome one of 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 cage. The victim may accept the insult, agreeing to the dominance of the aggressor, or he may decide to fight it out.

Neither of these is appropriate for a human. You can close the door to your bedroom controlling his access to the bed (you're dominant). But it may not be so simple to close off a chair or couch in the family room you share with your companions. One of the most effective means found to declare the dominance of the companion (human) over the companion (rabbit) 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 cause 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. The companion (human) has control of his chair.

## Summary

Training a companion (rabbit) requires commitment of time, effort, and thought on the part of the rabbit's companion (human). It isn't just teaching the word "No!" (this will only teach the rabbit to wait until the human isn't looking). It's learning to understand the 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 companion rabbit(s) to the fullest! Train them well and carefully, love them with all your heart, appreciate them for whom and what they are, and both of you will experience the great pleasure of sharing your lives with each other in harmony. Rabbits are delightful, little creatures!