

Evergreen Avian & Exotic Animal Hospital

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Rabbit Behavior

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Rabbits as house pets can be somewhat challenging but very rewarding. The domestic rabbit is descended from the European rabbit (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*) which digs large warrens and lives in a highly social environment. House rabbits are very curious and can have very forward personalities. They tend to form attachments to certain people and have very intense likes and dislikes. They do get into things and need to be closely supervised when running loose in the house. They may chew cords, so all electrical cords need to be protected. They have been known to dig in carpets and upholstery. A bored bunny can be a destructive bunny, so toys, hay, hay structures and social interactions are necessary.

Litter Box Training

This is a critical behavior for the house rabbit. Litter box training is based on the fact that they surround their warrens with specific elimination areas called latrines or scrapes, which serve as signals to rabbits from other warrens that they are encroaching on another rabbit's territory. The house rabbit maintains this predilection for selecting and consistently using one or more elimination sites. The basic principle of litterbox training in a rabbit is to identify where the rabbit is urinating and defecating and place a litterbox there. Most rabbits will continue to use that site.

If the rabbit will be housed in a cage part of the time, and allowed loose in the house at other times (supervised), it is generally best to train the rabbit to use a litterbox in the cage. To do this, confine the bunny to its cage until it selects an elimination area (usually a corner). Place a litterbox in that location. Once the rabbit consistently uses the litterbox, prop open the cage door to allow the bunny to roam. In general, rabbits return to the cage to eliminate.

If a cage is not used, then the owner needs to identify the area of the house where the litterbox is to be placed (where the bunny has chosen as its latrine area). Because a bunny that has not been litterbox trained will choose its site based on parameters that are not fully understood, the owner cannot pre-select the exact site, only the general area. (In contrast, the basic behavior used to litterbox train a cat is their predilection for digging a hole in which to eliminate.) To select the litterbox area, confine the bunny to an area (i.e. using a closed door, baby gate or temporarily play-penning). Once the rabbit has selected its elimination site, place a litterbox there.

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A note about litters. Rabbits may eat litter, so those based on recycled newspaper, alfalfa or oats are preferred. Do not use clay or clumping cat litter. Shavings are also discouraged. Some rabbits do well with just hay over newspaper lining the box. Other safe substrates include hay, straw, aspen bark, peat moss or compressed sawdust.

Like cats, rabbits may exhibit individual preferences for certain substrates or combinations of substrates and for the size and shape of the litterbox. If a rabbit does not consistently use the litterbox, try other sizes or shapes or substrates. Because rabbits may like to spend long periods sitting or lying in the litterbox, it is important that the litterbox be large enough for the rabbit to do so. If the rabbit frequently eliminates over the side of the box, one with higher sides or larger may be necessary.

Unlike cats, rabbits may move their litterbox. If it is important that the litterbox not be significantly moved, the owner may need to clamp or tie the box in place. However it is important to consider whether the exact position of the box is important in the household. If not, the rabbit should be allowed to move the box wherever it wants. This behavior may be derived from the fact that rabbits in the wild manipulate their environment not only by creating warren tunnels and rooms (called stops), but also by relocating their latrines. Once the bunny has identified the litterbox as its latrine, it may use the box even if the owner moves it. Other rabbits remain “site loyal” and discontinue using the box if it is moved.

Digging and Chewing

Centuries of being domesticated has not removed the propensity for digging and chewing. Because rabbits may chew on cords and wires, indoor areas have to be rabbit-proofed. Cords, especially electrical ones, should be moved out of the rabbit’s reach or covered (like with PVC pipe). Valuable objects should be placed out of the rabbit’s reach. Owners can prevent rabbits from digging in the couch cushions and chewing book covers by providing objects that rabbits can dig into, chew, and manipulate. There are many commercial toys available for rabbits including toys designed for parrots with wood to chew on. A basket with hay or straw may provide an area in which a rabbit can dig and form a nest. Treat food bits can be placed amongst the hay to promote foraging. Many rabbits will use digging motions to rearrange towels placed in a box for them.

Introducing a New Rabbit

Introduction of a new rabbit to a household with a rabbit (s) is a problem many owners face. As with many species that live in organized social groups, an established rabbit or rabbit group generally does not welcome strangers. In addition, if an individual pet rabbit is obtained, especially as a juvenile, and not exposed to other rabbits for months or years, it may have poor social skills. Therefore a new rabbit needs to be gradually introduced to other rabbits to avoid injuries from fighting.

Aggression Toward Humans

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Although aggression towards other rabbits is motivated by a combination of territorial defense, dominance, and fear, rabbit aggression toward humans is primarily motivated by fear. Human interactions with rabbits needs to be geared towards learning that humans are not to be feared (safe) and that interactions do not lead to pain and distress. In preparation for being pets, rabbit kittens (bunnies) should be handled by humans. It has been found that rabbit kittens handled in the first week of age, do not show fear reactions to humans.

Subsequent experiences with humans can alter a rabbit's behavior towards them. If a rabbit is held in a painful or stressful fashion or dropped while being held, it is likely to become afraid to be picked up. This fear response may be generalized to all humans, even if they do not attempt to pick up the rabbit. Fearful rabbits respond in a variety of ways. They may run away, crouch and freeze, or attack. If the attack results in the human moving away and leaving the rabbit alone, the rabbit will learn to repeat this behavior to frighten away the humans. The biting and scratching may be intense. The motivation is still fear. Handling by young children is problematic, as may children are likely to mishandle the rabbit even with adult supervision. If a rabbit bites a young child because they are frightened or have been hurt, the child likely retreats. This teaches the rabbit that biting is an effective defense. To prevent this young children should interact with a rabbit under direct supervision, and not be allowed to pick up the rabbit. Instead they should interact with the rabbit on the floor or a couch if the rabbit is comfortable jumping on and off the couch. Mini and dwarf rabbit breeds may be at greater risk for injury by children than are larger breeds.

If a rabbit has developed fear aggression, behavior modification is needed. Most experienced rabbit owners can learn to do this. The goal is to make the rabbit unafraid of humans.

Behavior Modification of an Aggressive Rabbit

1. Wear sturdy, protective clothing such as solid shoes, thick denim pants, and heavy leather gloves (like those used for handling aggressive dogs, birds of prey – can be welder's gloves or very heavy garden gloves.)
2. Sit quietly near the rabbit. This should be in a small room such as a bathroom that is not normally the rabbit's territory.
3. Once the rabbit has stopped attacking, offer it a delicious treat such as a carrot, piece of apple, or piece of banana. Moving slowly away from the rabbit when it is calm and quiet may also help in some cases.
4. Gradually interact with the rabbit, pet it, talk softly to it, introduce a toy. Eventually you may be able to carefully stroke the rabbit and pick it up and hold it securely. This process may take several weeks for a rabbit that has developed fear aggression due to painful and/or fear-inducing experiences. This includes handling in a non-secure way in the past.
5. When the rabbit has been rehabilitated, ensure that it does not have experiences like those that caused the initial problem.