



# Module 24: Understanding Rabbits and Rabbit Psychology

- Building a relationship with your rabbit
- Common misconstrued behaviour
- Rabbit elimination
- The chew

Module 24 will cover the following topics:

- Building a relationship with your rabbit
- Common misconstrued behaviour
- Rabbit elimination
- The chew
- Logic toys

**Understanding Rabbits and Rabbit Psychology - 4m36s**

## 24.1 Introduction

**Rabbits are deemed as lovable creatures - think of Disney's Thumper and other similar**

## **animations.**

Their adorable looks are often what make a person choose a rabbit for a pet; however, understanding rabbits and their psychology is essential before buying a rabbit for a pet. A startling number, 80% of rabbit pet owners, usually return rabbits to shelters because they are not as 'cuddly' as owners hoped for.

There are other reasons such as breeding, chewing too much and the amount of care required.

Reading about rabbits, regarding their instinctive behaviour and how to be a companion to your rabbit, can help limit the amount of rabbits that are returned.

## **24.2 Building a Relationship with your Rabbit**



**Rabbits are not often portrayed as intelligent pets, perhaps because humans have, in the past, used rabbits for food rather than pets.**

Rabbits are intelligent and enjoy affection.

You can build a relationship with your rabbit. Your rabbit can even greet you at the door if you want. It is all about the bond you build with your rabbit.

Rabbits are extremely expressive. You will see this in their behaviour. When your rabbit is happy it will be full of energy; running around, playing and enjoying the space it lives in. You can also provide your rabbit with toys to make them happier during their play.

However, rabbits are also animals that are programmed with a few instincts that can provide inappropriate behaviours - at least in your mind.

When your rabbit is hungry or cranky, they can start to chew.

When your rabbit wants love and affection from you, they will stop by you and wait a little. However, if there is no appropriate response they might scratch at the back of your leg with their front paws or teeth to get your attention.

If you are in their way they will nudge you rather forcefully with their nose and follow up with a bit of a nip.

To form a bond between you and your rabbit, you have to be able to understand a rabbit's communication. Communication is typically silent. While rabbits can be vocal they rarely use vocal communication. Your rabbit relies more on body language.

Rabbits are most comfortable on the ground, which can determine the behaviour they display when you are interacting with them. Rabbits hop but do not jump to high places. In the wild they spend most of their lives on the ground, in burrows and eating grass. Hence the reason your rabbit will be more comfortable at their level rather than being picked up, held and cuddled.

A good indication that your rabbit prefers the ground is their response to being picked up. Your rabbit may start moving its legs and attempt to get out of your arms. After a few times of being picked up your rabbit may hop quickly away each time you approach it. Instead, you should sit on the floor quietly and let the rabbit approach you, before gently petting it.

Always allow an animal to smell your hand before you start stroking it. Rabbits tend to like forehead, cheek and back scratches. They also enjoy a shoulder scratch. They do not appreciate neck, ear, feet, tail and stomach petting.

Rabbits, like most animals, will have periods where they want to play, be affectionate, and sleep. Rabbits also have distinct personalities which will influence what they prefer. Some rabbits like to relax and receive affection after they have just eaten. For other rabbits their food is an immediate energy source that makes them active.

If you are ever in doubt about bonding with your rabbit or giving your rabbit affection, watch their behaviour and let your pet rabbit come to you.

## 24.3 Common Misconstrued Behaviour



**Rabbits have typical behaviours that may be misconstrued by you.**

The best way to determine your rabbit's personality, instinctive behaviours and their overall feelings, is to observe them. Simply sit around and let your rabbit approach you, to determine what is natural and what is not.

Rabbits may playfully nip you or another rabbit. The nip is to get your attention, affection, or to prompt you play. However, your rabbit may not understand that they are nipping too hard. You can let your rabbit know you are hurt by reacting.

Never hit your rabbit, but crying out or holding your hand like an injured paw can help.

Your rabbit will see this reaction and after a few times of this reaction it will understand that it needs to nip a little less hard. The nipping will become more playful and less painful.

However, nipping can also be a sign of aggression, territorial protection or fear.

Rabbits that fear your touch or are afraid of something in their environment may nip to defend against a threat (even if that threat is perceived as you, for an unknown reason). If you do not smell

like your usual self or you have another pet odour on you, your rabbit may nip you in fear; not because they suddenly dislike you.

Aggression can be related to their sexual maturity. Unless you intend to breed your rabbit(s) you should have them spayed/neutered. As with cats and dogs, spaying and neutering rabbits helps to remove the urge to breed, which can then lower aggressive behaviour. Territorial nipping may happen with you or with another rabbit you have. Sometimes, as with cats, rabbits prefer not to share their area with another. The nipping will be more aggressive, quick, and often uncalled for in your mind. In your rabbit's mind they are just trying to say "Leave me alone, this is my spot".

If you have two rabbits you may see a change as sexual maturity occurs, when you may need to re-bond your animals. Again, it is related to territory and slight aggression to determine who the alpha rabbit is. Dominance can happen in rabbits, where one is the leader of the pack. As long as there is no harming and no danger connected with their behaviour you can leave them together. Sometimes, however, you will need to separate your rabbits and then re-introduce them.

Elimination issues with your rabbit can occur.

Rabbits can be trained to use a litter box; it will take time but can be done. If there are behaviours such as elimination or urinating in areas that are not allowed, there may be an issue or it could be instinct. Rabbits, as many other animals, have the instinct to cover their territory with urine. It can be a warning, a sign of sexual maturity, or a territory marker. These natural behaviours can be trained out.

## **Typical Rabbit Behaviours**

There are certain behaviours that are typical of rabbits and are demonstrated by most rabbits. However, as with any pets, some rabbits may display more of one trait compared to others. As you bond with your pet, you'll get familiar with your special bunny companion.

### **Bunny Hopping or Dancing**

Rabbits love jumping, hopping and this usually indicates excitement. At times, they may even jump up straight and spin in the air. This is also known as 'binkying'.

### **Chinning**

Rabbits like to rub the underside of their chins against surfaces to mark their scent. They may even mark you in a similar manner.

### **Thumping**

Bunnies will often thump their hind foot on the ground to signal danger or sexual interest in a mate.

### **Honking or Grunting**

Bunnies honk or grunt when they want to mate.

## **Growling**

Your rabbit may growl at you if they're annoyed or feel you're invading their space.

## **Nudging**

Bunnies may nudge you to get your attention or get you to stop doing something. For example, they may nudge you if you pet them too much.

## **Rabbit Flop**

Your bunny is very tired, happy and contented.

## **Ear Positions**

If his ears are pointed forward, this means he's curious about something. His ears will point straight up if he's scared.

They may stand up on their hind feet at times to get your attention or if they're looking for food.

## **Medical Changes**

Your rabbit should be playing, eating, drinking, defecating and urinating. They should also be chewing.

If your rabbit is not performing these normal behaviours then you may have an unwell pet.

There are other reasons, such as hormone changes, boredom, dominance, miscommunication, or a psychological reason. Check with a vet to ensure your rabbit does not have a medical reason for their behavioural changes. Also, be aware that rabbits are in many ways different from cats and dogs. Cats and dogs are more social with humans than rabbits. Your rabbit needs shelter, food, water and affection, as well as companionship.

## **24.4 The Chew**



**Natural instincts require your rabbit to burrow, dig and chew.**

Rabbits are not selective about what they chew. Remember wild rabbits? These rabbits are often seen in fields, grazing on the grass. They move on, chewing or "mowing the grass", several times throughout the day. Occasionally they will also chase and play together. Wild rabbits are also

naturally seen sitting around, grooming and working on sharpening their teeth. All of these natural behaviours are still a part of your pet rabbit.

You cannot expect your rabbit's natural instincts to change simply because you want them to live in your house. The best way for you to ensure your rabbit understands is by conditioning your rabbit. Training your rabbit to know what is appropriate and not appropriate to chew, dig or burrow into, is the best option. Do not yell at your rabbit. Do not startle them with a loud noise. You also should not chase your rabbit. Instead, work with your rabbit in rewarding your pet for their good behaviour.

The first step is to provide plenty of things that your rabbit is allowed to chew on. When your rabbit starts or is found chewing on something they should not, remove that item. After a couple of minutes provide your rabbit with an alternative item that they can chew on. Do not give a new chew option right away because this would be seen as a reward for chewing on the wrong thing. Also, do not wait too long as they might hop away and chew on something incorrect again.

You should have a room dedicated to your rabbit; especially when you are gone throughout the day. This room should not contain any items that your rabbit should not chew on. You should instead supply plenty of appropriate items to chew on, such as toys and food, and also provide bedding. If you allow your rabbit into other rooms you should 'rabbit proof' on their level. Do not leave shoes, clothing, bedding, and other objects you do not want destroyed at the level they can reach. This will prevent them from chewing on things that are not allowed. Any reward you give your rabbit for chewing should be praises, grooming, petting or treats. This lets your rabbit know they are chewing on the correct items. There are many toys sold in stores for rabbits and you can also create a few of your own out of cardboard/cardboard tubes. Also, keep your rabbit's nails short to prevent destructive burrowing.

Being the human, you are responsible for 'rabbit proofing' your home and training appropriate instinctive behaviour.

## **FACT**



Even a small rabbit can still jump up to a whopping three feet high.

## 24.5 Rabbit Elimination



**Rabbits can be litter trained.**

This is something that new owners may not understand.

Those who have never had a rabbit may think it is impossible but your rabbit is intelligent. It is able to learn where it can eliminate but you will need to start training early.

As soon as you bring your rabbit home you need to begin the litter training.

It is far better to litter train. Show your rabbit where to go, and when you see your rabbit using the litter box give your rabbit a treat for the first five times. After five times you can switch to praises, petting and grooming. Your rabbit will associate eliminating in the box with rewards, thus it will start to use the box and have fewer accidents on the floor. You do not want to reward your rabbit for too long or on every occasion once they start using the box every time they need to eliminate. They could stop if there is no reward. You may also need to take your rabbit to the box for the first couple of times.

### **For example:**

If you see your rabbit getting into position to eliminate you should pick your rabbit up and carry it to the box

When your rabbit starts to eliminate in other locations you should first check to make certain it is not a territory issue. Also make certain they are not choosing your favourite items as a way to protect or show their territorial desires. Once you know the cause, retrain. Note that rabbits will eat their faeces, but this is a digestive health instinct and completely correct.

## 24.6 Logic Toys

**Your rabbit will enjoy logic toys.**

Logic toys are puzzles made for rabbits that they can figure out and be rewarded for. Also consider

chew toys, soft toys and balls, as rabbits enjoy these options during playtime.

## **Summary**

Rabbits are intelligent creatures that have some natural body language communication versus verbal communication techniques.

Your rabbit needs to bond with you on their level to be comfortable and to learn your scent.

There is certain behaviour you may not recognise as normal, but through observation you can learn about your pet.

You also need to provide plenty of chew toys, a litter box and logic toys to keep your rabbit happy. Rabbits enjoy a free life where they can roam and can be trained. It will take time, and perhaps a little more than a cat or dog, but they can be amazing, cuddly and rewarding pets.

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