



Reading Your Rabbit

by Amy Shapiro

Rabbits talk to each other and to humans using a wide variety of body positions and facial expressions, and a few vocalizations. Here is a basic vocabulary of rabbit language to help you start a conversation with your companion.

Ears forward. (TV antenna position) “Something has caught my attention.”

Ears back. a. “I don’t like what you’re doing, or what I think you’re about to do.” b. “I’m giving my radar a rest. Wake me for supper.”

Ears-back position shows the importance of context and of reading the whole rabbit. If your rabbit puts her ears back, tail up, and growls and lunges when you try to pet her, the message is entirely different from that of a rabbit who is sitting in a favorite corner at midday, ears at rest, front legs tucked (sometimes called **meatloaf position**), eyes at half-mast.

One ear back, one ear forward or to the side. “Something is going on but it doesn’t yet merit my full attention.”

The nose-nudge. a. You reach for your rabbit and he thrusts his nose forward, chin flat on the ground: “Pet me. Now.” b. You’re standing around, minding your own business. Your rabbit hops up and nudges your shin with his nose: “You’re in my path. Make way, buddy.”

Tooth-grinding. You and your rabbit are sitting together on the floor, listening to a ball game on the radio. you hear a strange noise and notice that she seems to be chewing something – like rocks, maybe, from the sound of it: “I’m very happy. If I were a cat I’d be purring.” (Not to be confused with the rarer **tooth-chattering**, which is a sign of pain.)

Nipping. a. “You’re my friend, and I groom all my friends very thoroughly.” b. “Quit trying to put that medicine in my eyes.” c. “I’m a macho male bunny. If you

don’t have me neutered I’ll be running the show around here from now on.” d. “I’m in the mood for lust.”

Licking. “I trust you.”

Lunging. Her ears are back, her chin is thrust forward and up, her tail is up: “Back off.”

Circling. As you attempt to walk across the room, your rabbit runs in circles around you: “Let’s play, Let’s court. I feel frisky.”

Dancing. Your rabbit dashes half-way across the room and makes a 180-degree turn in midair: “Yippee!”

Flopping. Your rabbit, who has been sitting quietly, or grooming herself, suddenly falls over on her side, exposing her belly. you think she’s having a heart attack: “I’m like totally relaxed. Life is wonderful, and so am I.”

Mounting. Putting her front paws on a toy or another rabbit or your foot, your rabbit makes thrusting movements with her hips. a. “This is just a reminder that I’m top bunny around here.” b. “I’m in heat.” c. “I’m feeling feisty.”

REM sleep. His eyelids twitch. His ears twitch. His whiskers vibrate. His head droops, then comes up suddenly. His teeth grind. He starts to fall on his side, then rights himself, then relaxes again: “I’m in another galaxy, dreaming of giant groves of parsley and banana.”

Chinning. She hops from place to place, rubbing her chin against table legs, human legs, bookcases, her litterbox: “This is my home. I’m leaving a scented calling card to let everyone know that I live here.”

Tail up. Your teenage bunny starts munching on your new stereo speaker,



Ursula demonstrates the one ear back meatloaf position

even though you’ve just given her fresh branches from her favorite fruit tree. You scold her with a loud NO! She looks at you, then scampers off, tail high in the air or switching rapidly from side to side: “Oh yeah? Well, same to you and many more.”

Growling. “Leave me alone. I don’t trust you. If you keep pushing, I’ll bite you.”

Honking. “I’m excited.”

Screaming. “I’m in excruciating pain. I’m panicked and terrified.”

These are just a few elements of rabbit language. Your own rabbit’s personal dialect can best be learned through patient observation. Spend time on the floor with him. See the world from his point of view. Pay attention to your own body language and his responses to it. The better you know his normal actions and positions, the more quickly you will note any changes that may be the first sign of illness.

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.