

## Rabbit Behaviour

The biology and behaviour of pet rabbits is very similar to that of wild rabbits, so it's very important that we understand and consider their natural habitat and behaviour to ensure that they're as happy and healthy as possible.

Lack of an interesting environment, opportunities to exercise, appropriate company and mental stimulation can lead rabbits to display abnormal behaviours including depression, fur plucking (self harming), aggression, chewing cage bars, altered feeding, drinking or toileting habits, sitting hunched, excessive hiding, reluctance to move and repeated circling of their enclosure.

The good news is that there are some simple actions you can take to prevent these problems and ensure your rabbits are happy and healthy:

- Provide an interesting environment with lots of hiding places and toys to interact with. Provide your rabbits with opportunities to exercise in a large, interesting area every day. Rabbits love to run, dig and jump and this keeps them emotionally and physically fit.
- Spend time with your pets every day. Rabbits are intelligent, social creatures, that need to play and interact with other friendly rabbits as well as with humans. They love toys and can even be 'clicker-trained', which is great for their mental stimulation.
- Provide a well balanced diet with lots of hay, grass and healthy high-fibre snacks to promote foraging behaviour. Think about how you dispense their food. Use a variety of dispensers such as willow balls, cardboard boxes, hay racks and treat balls so that accessing some of their food is made more challenging. This keeps rabbits busy and stimulated.
- Provide lots of places to hide. Rabbits are prey animals and their natural response to potential threats is to run and hide. They will feel more secure if they know they have lots of bolt holes to access.
- Allow them to be themselves. Rabbits have amazingly individual personalities and make great members of the family as long as their specific needs are taken into consideration. Nowadays, we have a far greater understanding of what rabbits need to keep them happy and healthy. It is also important to remember that the way a rabbit behaves will depend on their age, personality and past experiences.

Rabbits are prey animals first and foremost and their natural response often is to run and hide. They have a wonderful ability to interact with humans but need time and regular, gentle handling from an early age to become comfortable around humans. Offer your rabbits a shelter and lots of bolt holes/hiding places. Open spaces with no protection will cause your rabbits to feel under threat.

Think about what other animals are already in your house, and whether they are a natural predator to rabbits. For example rabbits will feel scared being housed next to dog kennels or ferret enclosures!

Rabbits that show aggressive behaviour towards you and/or your other pets may often be in pain, distress and/or suffering emotionally. You should get your pet checked by a vet to rule out any form of illness or injury that could be causing the behaviour problem. Your vet can then refer you to a behaviour expert if necessary.

In the wild, rabbits have plenty to keep them occupied, from foraging to reproduction to territorial defence. Pet rabbits, on the other hand, often lack stimulation, which can lead to behavioural problems and poor health. Much like humans, they need to be kept physically and mentally active. You can replicate a rabbit's natural environment by providing some of the items below:

- Tunnels (that are wide enough for the rabbits to pass through easily).
- Tree stumps (from trees that are safe for rabbits to chew, e.g. apple, that have not been sprayed with chemicals).
- Safe, unsprayed twigs (which can be hung up so that they can pull them).
- Suitable toys (there are many rabbit toys available commercially; ensure any you buy are safe and that your rabbits use them).
- Planter filled with potting compost for digging.
- Platforms for hiding under and climbing on.
- Places to hide (because rabbits are naturally wary).
- Cardboard boxes.
- Games, such as food items in brown paper which they have to unwrap.

Rabbits become bored of toys quickly, so rotate items regularly to keep them interested. Ensure there are enough resources for all the rabbits to use at the same time. Regularly inspect items for damage and potential injury hazards and repair, discard or replace any items that become dangerous.

### **Digging**

Digging is a favourite pastime of rabbits, both domestic and wild. By providing digging substrates, such as a child's sand pit filled with earth and sand, your pet rabbits will be able to dig away without damaging your garden or escaping.

### **Marking**

Rabbits' homes are their castles and in the wild they are very protective of their territory, marking out anything they see as theirs using chin secretions, urine and droppings. These markings also help them to feel reassured as their environment smells familiar. Pet rabbits will also display these behaviours and you should allow them to do so.

### **Variety**

Just like humans, rabbits become bored if their environment remains the same, so consider an occasional change of scenery. However, be careful as too much change can be stressful. Wild rabbits' survival depends on an intimate knowledge of their surroundings in order to escape from predators, so structural changes to your pet

rabbits' 'warren' should be kept subtle, such as changing their toys and regularly providing new ones.

### **Training**

Not many people know that rabbits can be trained. Pet rabbits really benefit from positive reward-based training like 'clicker training'. For example, you can train them to rear up to collect a healthy treat and even to go over small jumps (this should only be attempted by rabbits that are used to doing basic training and commands with their owner), which is great for their physical and mental stimulation. However you must only use positive reward-based training methods and must never shout at or punish your rabbits as they are unlikely to understand and will become nervous and scared.