

Aggression in Rabbits

To the uninitiated, rabbits have a reputation for being docile, passive creatures. Any aggressive actions from a rabbit can be surprising, even alarming, to new owners.



When Rabbits Fight Rabbits

Rabbits fight to...

- Establish dominance or authority of a group
- Keep newcomers out
- Protect their young

Dominance is probably the most important cause of aggression. Although neutering can reduce an animal's defense of their territory, neutering will not completely eliminate aggressive behavior.

Aggression is more likely to be observed as the rabbit reaches puberty (4-6 months in many breeds), and tends to be a little more common in females than males.

In the wild, fighting usually continues until one rabbit runs away, however house rabbits do not have this luxury. When new rabbits are introduced, fighting often occurs (*see the client handout "Rabbit Introductions" for specific recommendations*), however even bonded rabbits that have lived together for months or years can fight.

Fighting among bonded rabbits is most likely to occur due to a change in the group's status or "pecking order"

- One rabbit may develop a strange smell. For instance a visit to the veterinary hospital can cause the rabbit(s) left at home to "turn on" the returning individual.

Exposing both (or all) rabbits to the same strange smells can minimize the risk of one individual being shunned. For example, if one rabbit must be hospitalized, it may be possible for a second rabbit to be housed in the same hospital cage. This method has the added benefit of providing moral support for and minimizing stress to the hospitalized bunny.

- Rabbits can also fight over resources like a favorite snack. Minimize the risk of squabbles by making available at least as many food bowls and water bottles as there are rabbits. A good rule of thumb for litter pans is to provide for as many pets as you own plus one more.

When Rabbits "Attack" People

Rabbit can demonstrate aggression towards people in a number of ways. The rabbit may box with its forefeet or even chase a person across a room. The bunny can also nip, or

even bite hard enough to cause a bruise. The rabbit can even bite and refuse to let go. While hanging on with its teeth, the bunny may kick with the rear feet.

Why do rabbits bite people? Some of the reasons are similar to a rabbit's reasons for biting another rabbit while other causes, like many "animal problems", are behaviors that humans inadvertently create or train.

1. Pain or illness
2. Territorial aggression
3. Learned behavior, improper socialization
4. Previous trauma creating aversive behavior

Read Your Rabbit's Body Language

Regardless of the underlying cause, when a rabbit actually bites or kicks a person, this usually means the human has missed a number of nonverbal cues the rabbit has tried to communicate: "*Do not pick me up*" or "*Leave me alone*".

Posture can be a warning signs that a bunny is in a "bad mood":

- Flattened ears
- Tail stretched up and out
- Thrust nose or chin forward
- Strained, upright stance

If this posture is ignored, then the rabbit may thump its feet or sniff agitatedly. He may circle, chase, box or lunge at, or even jaw snap at the source of their displeasure. Some individuals may vocalize making short, barking growls or hissing, snorting, or grunting.

Do's and Don'ts

Every rabbit is different and management of aggression can vary widely, however the basic approach to the aggressive rabbit generally includes:

- Do NOT pick up the rabbit
- Do NOT chase the rabbit
- Do NOT reach in the rabbit's cage
- Do NOT discipline the rabbit using "negative reinforcement" like hitting
- Do NOT approach the rabbit's head from the front or towards the nose

DO have your aggressive rabbit evaluated by an experienced small mammal veterinarian. Pain or illness is a very important cause of aggression in the rabbit, and your bunny should be screened for medical conditions that cause pain or distress.

DO have your pet neutered. Aggression, territoriality, and circling are common signs of sexual maturity in the rabbit, so having your house rabbit spayed or castrated will significantly improve their pet quality.

DO provide “casual attention. Sit down in the same room, ideally at your rabbit’s level—on the floor. Avoid focused, “in-your-face” attention; instead do “your own thing” like reading a book.

DO greet the rabbit with affection and a soft, calm voice—even if they are chasing you (granted easier said than done!)

DO allow your rabbit to come out of its cage on its own.

Since there may be times that you will need to move a disgruntled bunny, have veterinary staff demonstrate the proper way to safely restrain a rabbit in a towel. When performed incorrectly, toweling can lead to leg and back fractures.

DO keep a log that chronicles the problem. Is aggression associated with specific people? What was happening just before the aggression was observed? How did the human(s) involved respond? Is there a certain time of the day that aggressive behavior is observed? Patterns that are not immediately obvious may begin to emerge in complicated cases.

DO screech?

An immediate short-pitched “*eek*” or “*ow*” in response to being nipped or bitten can mimic the sound another rabbit might make. Theoretically this can help your rabbit understand his behavior is unacceptable, however use caution with this technique as fearful bunnies can be provoked by a high-pitched squeal.

Conclusion

Life with a house rabbit is a lesson in the value of nonverbal communication, and never is particularly true for the aggressive rabbit. The successful house rabbit owner can pick up on a variety of cues—including cues that say, “*Leave me alone*”. The underlying cause of rabbit aggression can range from the simple and straightforward, like defense of personal territory, to a complex problem related to past trauma or poor socialization.

References and Further Reading

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