

10 Ways to Get Your Rabbit to Cooperate

by Caroline Charland, President, The Bunny Bunch

Does your rabbit come to you when called? Can you pick up and hold your rabbit? Does your rabbit sit still to be groomed? Can you get your rabbit into a carrier for a trip to the vet? The answer I often hear is "No". It seems to me that most rabbits have their humans under a spell.

Almost everyday people tell me they cannot pick up their rabbit, that their rabbit just won't cooperate. At our weekend adoption and education events we have a line of people with their rabbits in carriers waiting to get a nail trim, because their rabbit won't let them do it at home. The stories I hear about how long it took to get the rabbit into the carrier or how traumatic it is for the rabbit to be picked up are endless. To tell you the truth, half the time I think it is the people who are having the hard time and the rabbits just have them fooled.

Rabbits are built to be low to the ground; even though they jump up onto the couch or onto a bed, they are not climbers like cats are. Therefore, they prefer to have all four feet on the ground and that is part of the reason they may resist being picked up.

It is important to spend time with your rabbit at their level, meaning lying on your tummy on the ground. Your rabbit will come up to you after a while and settle down by you hoping for head and ear strokes. This will start a growing trust between you.

It is also important to know how to pick up and hold your rabbit, how to groom your rabbit and how to put your rabbit into a carrier. If your rabbit is sick or injured and needs a trip to the vet, or if there is an emergency such as an earthquake, fire or flood, you need to be able to do this quickly and safely.

10 ways to get your rabbit to cooperate

1. Get your rabbit to trust you
2. Give your rabbit veggies or healthy treats from your hands
3. Use a clicking sound when you feed
4. Pick your rabbit up in a safe, calm manner
5. Provide a safe and secure carrier for travel
6. Provide a safe, adequate indoor living area
7. Protect your rabbit from unsafe animals or people
8. Never discipline your rabbit
9. Give your rabbit praise
10. Respect your rabbit

A rabbit must feel safe and secure when being approached, picked up or held. So here are a few tips to show you how to accomplish this.

Getting to know your rabbit

When you first bring a rabbit home, it is important to give the rabbit a safe place to call its own. Even if your rabbit is going to have full run of the house or a room, for the first week or so it is a good idea to provide an exercise pen for your rabbit to live in. This does a couple of things. First of all, your rabbit has its own space to call home. Second of all, rabbits coming to a new home will litter train much better in an enclosed pen at first, rather than in a large room. Once you have had your rabbit for a few days, open the pen and let it come out for exploring and run-about time. Be sure to rabbit proof any room your rabbit will have access to by removing any dangers such as poisonous plants and cover all electric cords so they cannot be chewed.

Picking up your rabbit

Some rabbits are shyer than others and may take longer to come around to you. If this is the case, try spending time on the floor in the rabbit's living quarters. Just sit and read and spend time in there. The rabbit will be curious and start coming to you and with time will want fuss and to spend time with you. First, go up to your rabbit crouching down and give it a stroke on the head talking calmly. Some rabbits will run when you approach them as they are used to the routine of you trying to pick them up and them running away from you. If this is the case, you first need to gain your rabbit's trust. Sit on the ground and wait for the rabbit to come up to you. Once that happens, hold your hand out with a treat in it, such as a couple of sprigs of parsley or cilantro. Eventually, your rabbit will come up and eat the treat. Do this a couple of times a day, without trying to pick the rabbit up. This will establish trust between you.

Then firmly (but not squeezing) put one hand under the rabbit's chest, with your thumb around the rabbit's side or back, and your forefinger in between the rabbit's front legs. With your other hand, scoop up the rabbit's bottom. Do this all in one motion, putting the rabbit against your chest.

If the rabbit starts to struggle, that means it does not feel safe and you may need to hold him a little tighter, keeping in mind not to squeeze too hard.

It may take a few tries for you and your rabbit to feel comfortable. It is a good idea to practice doing this from a kneeling position on the floor so you don't have to lift the rabbit up too high.

Clicking will have your rabbit running to you

If you have a hard time getting your rabbit to come to you, start making a clicking sound with your tongue, or click every time you feed your rabbit, also calling your rabbit's name. This is a super way to get your rabbit to recognize a noise and associate it with food. All my rabbits know that if they hear the clicking sound or I am calling their name that means to come to me, and that all started by training them with a small healthy treat. Now they just come even without getting a treat. Be careful though to give only healthy treats such as veggies, untreated rose petals or rabbit-safe flowers and herbs such as rosemary or bay leaves. Too many pellets or fruit can be fattening, and store-bought treats are often full of sugar, which is not a good idea. Never give crackers, cereal or junk food to your rabbit.

The good thing about handfeeding a treat to your rabbit is that it will not just associate your hands with being picked up, but will know your hands as offering a treat, too.

Getting your rabbit to sit still for a nail trim and grooming

First of all, get everything you need to groom your rabbit: nail clippers, Quikstop, q-tips for cleaning the scent glands and a brush for removing the loose hair. Decide where you will be grooming your rabbit. If you are using a counter or table, make sure your rabbit is not going to be able to run and jump off. Holding your rabbit on a towel on your lap often works very well. Pick up your rabbit and place him on your lap. Let your rabbit settle by talking to him calmly and stroking his head or ears. If he wants to get off, just hold him firmly. Sometimes covering his eyes for a little bit will settle him down. Once he gets used to the routine and knows he cannot do what he wants, but has to do what you want, you should have no trouble.

Getting your rabbit into a travel carrier

Your rabbit's carrier does not need to be a place your rabbit does not like to go. It can be made into a good experience for your rabbit. Look at it from a rabbit's point of view. First they are chased, and then after a while caught and stuffed into a carrier they only see once in a while. Often the carrier is not appropriate for transporting a rabbit, which makes it all the more a bad experience for the rabbit and the owner, too.

The kind of carrier you transport your rabbit in can make a huge difference in making your rabbit feel safe and secure. Get a hard plastic carrier. You need to be able to easily get your rabbit in and out of the carrier, either through a top opening or a large front door. Many carriers in the stores are made for cats, who will often just walk out of the carrier whether the opening is small or large. Rabbits, however, need to be taken out so make sure there is enough room to put your hands in and take the rabbit out without catching its legs on the door.

Never use cloth or cardboard carriers. The cardboard carriers do not hold up and the cloth carriers are just not safe. For one thing, your rabbit may chew out of a cardboard or cloth carrier, plus they are just not protective.

In the bottom of the carrier, fold up a nice soft towel so your rabbit has something to lie on and to prevent him from sliding around in the carrier.

If you leave your rabbit's carrier out in his area with the door open, he will often use it as hidey place to go and nap. If you don't have room to leave it out all the time, try to put it out from time to time, putting the towel in and a few veggies in the back. Before long, your rabbit will go in by itself, munch on the veggies and not feel scared of it.

If you still have trouble getting your rabbit in the carrier, don't forget the clicking sound. By having the carrier out on a regular basis, putting a few veggies in it and then clicking so your rabbit knows it is food time, it will get him in a routine to run into the carrier and munch on the veggies. Then you can close the door and be on your way. Make sure you secure the carrier in your car by putting the seat belt around it.

What not to do

- Don't scare your rabbit by chasing it around the room, yelling and screaming its name
- Don't try to trap your rabbit in a corner, under a couch or by blocking off areas
- Do not let young children pick up a rabbit
- NEVER pick up a rabbit by the ears
- NEVER scruff a rabbit by the skin on the back of its neck
- NEVER grab your rabbit by its legs or tail

How to avoid being scratched or bitten

A rabbit's nails are continually growing, which can make them very long and sharp. When a rabbit is being picked up and does not feel safe, it will struggle to be put down, often resulting in the person being scratched, sometimes quite badly. This does not mean that the rabbit was trying to hurt you; it just means it did not feel safe and struggled to be put down, resulting in scratching you. So always keep your rabbit's nails trimmed.

Rabbits rarely bite. Some rabbits can become aggressive if not spayed or neutered, or if they are kept in a cage. Often the combination of both can result in the rabbit protecting its living area by lunging, boxing and sometimes biting. If this is the case, a few simple changes can prevent this. First of all, the rabbit should be spayed or neutered. Once that is done and the hormones die down, they don't feel the need to be so protective of their area. Then the rabbit should be provided with adequate space for living. We suggest an exercise pen instead of a cage. The minimum space a rabbit should live in is 4 ft. wide x 4 ft. deep. Make sure you provide lots of toys and chews so your rabbit does not become bored. Last of all, rabbits should not live alone and need to be bonded to at least one other rabbit. Rabbits naturally live in groups, so having them by themselves can cause a rabbit to become lonely and destructive.

Getting your rabbit to use a litter box

It is natural for rabbits to use a certain spot to go to the bathroom. They are very clean animals and do not like a dirty area. Get a large litter box, big enough for your rabbit to lie in. Put rabbit-safe litter (like Carefresh) in the bottom of the box and pile a good-quality grass hay on top of the litter. Rabbits like to graze on hay and poop at the same time, so by putting hay in the litter box not only will your rabbit start using the litter box, he will also start eating more hay. The hay should be piled up in the morning and again in the evening. Depending on how many rabbits use the litter box it should be changed every day or every other day.

If you find your rabbit is pooping outside the litter box, just pick up the poops and put them in the litter box and that should solve the problem. Make sure you clean your litter box out with white vinegar once a week to keep it free of built-up urine. For good litter box habits, it is important that your rabbit is spayed or neutered.

Litter Box Do's

- Do have a large litter box
- Do use rabbit-safe litter
- Do keep hay piled on top of the litter
- Do keep the litter box clean

Litter Box Don'ts

- Do not use cat litter
- Do not use small or corner litter boxes
- Do not use unsafe cleaning agents
- Do not use a cage as a litter box

Should I discipline my rabbit?

The answer is a big NO. Rabbits do well with kindness and rewards, not harsh words or punishment. If you use some form of discipline with your rabbit, your rabbit will not want to be around you, will become scared and frightened of you and could become depressed and withdrawn.

Rewarding your rabbit for coming to you with strokes, praise and sometimes treats will benefit your relationship and grow into a strong trust between you.

Tips for keeping a single rabbit happy

- Have your rabbit spayed or neutered
- Provide lots of toys and chews to keep your rabbit occupied
- Spend at least three hours a day with your rabbit, even if it is cuddling in bed at night
- If your rabbit is confined to a cage or pen, make sure you provide at least four hours of out-of-pen time in a safe room for exercise and play
- The best thing for a single rabbit is another rabbit
- Tips for getting rabbits to cooperate with each other
- Rabbits need to go through the bonding process before they can be together
- Start by having them together in a small neutral place such as a bathtub or laundry basket
- Limit each meeting time to only about ten or fifteen minutes for the first couple of days
- Stroke both of their heads while they get to know each other
- They will try to nip or fight so you must watch their every move
- Try doing the bonding at least twice a day
- You will notice they will start to groom each other
- Bonding can take from a week to months
- Only bond rabbits if you intend for them to live together
- NEVER leave them alone until they are bonded as they could get into a nasty fight

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