

Understanding rabbits part three: addressing behaviour problems

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Emma Magnus, BSc (Hons), MSc, CCAB looks at why and how rabbit behaviour problems arise, and treatment and prevention techniques

ALTHOUGH the intelligence of the rabbit is often questioned, these animals exhibit all the bonding characteristics of the larger companion animals. They can be trained to toilet in a particular location, walk on a lead and come when called – often better than some of their canine and feline counterparts. However, as with cats and dogs, problems can arise if we misinterpret their actions or interact with them inappropriately.

In this, the final part of the series, I look at some common behaviour problems and their treatment and prevention.

Preventing behaviour problems

Many behaviour problems can be prevented by ensuring our rabbits are kept in a safe environment, with plenty of space, a good diet and regular social contact. The checklist below pinpoints key areas of rabbit husbandry that can help prevent, or address, a behaviour problem. The rabbit:

- has areas to retreat to if it is scared or wants to be left alone;
- is free from the presence of predators and unusual noises and smells;

- is able to dig and work to gain food;
- is able to mark its territory effectively with chin secretions, urine and faecal pellets;
- does not feel threatened at any time;
- feels secure when picked up and not “loomed over”;
- is fed an appropriate diet that encourages normal digestive function, dental abrasion and prolonged feeding time;
- has regular exercise and social contact with another individual; and
- is not encountering reprimands or punishment from the owner.

Early experience

Socialising a rabbit and habituating it to the environment is one of the most important steps in its early development, and one that can help prevent behaviour problems later on. In essence, a rabbit born into a noisy, healthy environment that includes daily encounters with different people (and perhaps other animals) is more likely to develop into a relaxed animal unlikely to display fear-related behaviours as an adult.

Although behaviourists are not able to pinpoint the exact sensitive period in the rabbit's development, studies suggest that experiences the rabbit has between 10 days and six weeks of age can have a profound impact on later behaviour. Several studies suggest that handling rabbit kittens between 10 and 20 days old affects behaviour and leads to bolder and less fearful rabbits when 14 weeks old.

Handling rabbits at the age of three months may also impact on their response to humans as an adult. One interesting piece of research showed that only rabbits that had been handled by humans before weaning (just over three weeks old in the wild, four weeks in a domestic situation) were likely to approach a human after weaning, and only those rabbits that had been exposed to a cat when young did not fear the cat when older. Rabbit kittens that had not been handled or exposed to a cat avoided both after weaning.

To maintain the socialisation started by the breeder, a young rabbit should have short, daily sessions of handling and grooming in its new home. There should be a gradual introduction to the normal stimuli in a home or garden once it has settled in. This is made easier if the rabbit will be living in the home, with washing machines and vacuum cleaners in evidence, although the rabbit must be given an cage or enclosed area to retreat to.

Behaviour problems

Aggression to owner

Rabbits can be aggressive towards their owners for a variety of reasons – the most common being fear. Fear aggression in an adult rabbit can develop through a lack of handling as a young rabbit or as a result of a bad experience during handling.

Each time the rabbit is handled, it feels nervous and eventually uses aggression to prevent being picked up. The behaviour then becomes learned, as the rabbit discovers it gets the desired result.

Some aggression occurs over what the rabbit would consider to be territorial disputes. Typically, the rabbit is aggressive each time the owner tries to feed it or clean out the cage. The aggression can be quite severe and will be understandably off-putting to the owner, who may consider rehoming the rabbit or having it put to sleep.

Treatment

If the rabbit is displaying aggression due to a lack of handling when young, or a negative experience, it is important to stop attempting to pick up the rabbit for a period of at least six weeks. In this time the rabbit will start to alter the way it views the owner and gain confidence in interactions.

Initially, help should be sought to ensure that a correct method of handling was being attempted in the past. The breeder may be helpful, and if there are any problems they should be rectified by practising on another rabbit – or even a life-sized cuddly toy.

The programme for teaching a rabbit to accept being picked up should be introduced for several short periods each day:

- The rabbit's favourite treat should be identified and offered to it with no attempt to pick it up or stroke it. Hands should be rolled in some of the rabbit's dirty bedding first to remove any unusual smells.
- Once the rabbit is happily taking the treat (this may take a few days), gradually start to introduce small amounts of stroking. For very aggressive rabbits use a soft, longhanded brush, which should be rolled in the rabbit's bedding first. If the rabbit bites the brush, keep it still so that it learns that aggression does not lead to the interactions stopping, and continue once the rabbit has calmed down and is eating the treat again.
- The use of the brush can be withdrawn by shortening the length of the handle, then, holding the hand over the main head of the brush and then removing the brush altogether.

- The next stage aims to introduce some of the more invasive components of handling one by one, while the rabbit is eating. These include laying a hand over the rabbit's shoulders, placing a hand lightly on the rabbit's rump and leaning over the rabbit.
- Picking up the rabbit should only be attempted once it is confident in the above stages. The owner should sit with his or her lap at the same height as the floor so it can be scooped on to the lap, where hand feeding can carry on.
- Finally, short bouts of lifting can be performed, always making sure a food reward is given.

When a rabbit is territorially aggressive, it is worth having it neutered – particularly if the behaviour seems to coincide with puberty, between four and six months of age. Providing more than one food bowl and lots of hay should dilute the rabbit's defence of what it perceives to be one valuable food area. Giving the rabbit a much larger and more challenging environment should also help to reduce the aggression.

Rabbits should not be punished for aggression as this will make the situation worse and will ruin the relationship between rabbit and owner. Similarly, offering it something else to bite (such as a gardening glove or bar of soap) in the hope that this will put it off rarely solves the problem.

Prevention

As a prey animal, the rabbit has a tendency to view its owner as a predator; it is therefore up to the owner to act as anything but. We often bend over rabbits, approach them suddenly or make lots of noise when we are around them – it is no wonder they can become scared of us. Bearing this in mind, and approaching from a different height, can often make a big difference to a rabbit's interest in being stroked or handled.

A good start in life with a breeder that has handled the rabbits from an early age should prevent many problems associated with aggression.

Aggression towards another rabbit

Some rabbits are aggressive towards others and we have to accept this as a consequence of keeping our rabbits within an enclosed area, where they will compete over resources.

Same-sex rabbits can display aggression as they reach puberty (between four and six months of age) or during the breeding season.

Introducing a new rabbit to an existing rabbit may cause problems as they try to share the same territory and, quite naturally, compete over access to favoured areas and food.

Occasionally, rabbits that have lived together quite happily can show aggression towards each other when they are separated and taken to the vet. Taking them to the surgery together can prevent this. If rabbits that have lived together quite happily start to fight for another reason, advise owners to bring them in for a check up to eliminate possible underlying medical conditions.

In some situations, rabbits may direct the fear of a situation into aggression towards a companion. An example of this is when it has been scared by a loud noise or a predator.

Treatment

Neutering can help, particularly when same-sex individuals are fighting during puberty. A total revamp of the environment to make it larger and more complex, with more to do and areas that allow the rabbits to avoid contact with each other, markedly reduces aggression. Introducing lots of hay and spreading out food should help reduce possessiveness and give them plenty to do.

When introducing rabbits to each other, putting them into an enclosure and “letting them get on with it” often causes huge problems. Invariably, the damage in rabbit relationships is done during this first meeting and it can be very hard to ever re-introduce some individuals. However, this programme for introducing rabbits on the first occasion can be used for individuals that have “fallen out of love”:

- Select a neutral environment; ideally, an area where the animals have not been before. Ensure there are lots of hiding places.
- Bring the rabbits together using animal travel baskets, preferably ones that allow the animal to see out of the front and sides. Hand feed treats through the baskets so they learn to associate the reward with the presence of the other rabbit.
- If the rabbits are not distressed or aggressive in the baskets, reduce the distance between them little and often over several days. Keep up the treats and increase the distance between them if either individual reacts adversely.
- Once the rabbits appear relaxed, bring them together without the baskets. Placing lots of hay, green vegetables and healthy treats around the area will give them plenty to do.
- Once this meeting is successful it should be repeated several times until the rabbits show relaxed behaviour or mutual grooming. They should be separated at the end of each session.
- They can then be introduced to their new home, which should be large with lots of feeding areas and hiding places.

Prevention

When obtaining littermates or a companion rabbit for an existing one, an individual of the opposite sex makes for a more likely union. As soon as the rabbits reach puberty, one or both should be neutered to prevent pregnancy and behavioural problems developing.

When introducing a new rabbit, time should be taken to introduce them gradually and avoid throwing them together. A buck should never be put into a doe's hutch; to do so can cause enormous problems and probably quite severe injuries.

The rabbits' hutch or home environment should be large and provide lots of boltholes and areas that allow the rabbits to avoid contact. Providing a healthy diet that allows the rabbits to perform natural eating behaviour and spreads the food throughout the territory can prevent some problems developing.

Loss of toilet training

A perfectly trained house rabbit can start to deposit faeces and urine in locations other than the tray as it reaches puberty. Owners will describe how their rabbit runs in circles around their legs, possibly grunting and depositing faeces. On occasion a spray of urine may follow. Sometimes rabbits will lose toilet training if there has been a sudden change in the brand of litter or if the tray has become offensive for some reason, such as by changing its location.

Once a primary problem has developed, a secondary problem of over-marking can occur. If a rabbit stops toileting in the right place and starts leaving urine and faeces in the wrong place and keeps smelling that it went there, it will carry on.

Treatment

Neutering is an effective way of reducing toileting problems associated with puberty or during the breeding season. If problems develop after a change of litter or location of the tray then these should be reverted to normal. Once an incorrect association has been formed – for example, the rabbit is routinely urinating on the sofa – it can be very hard to break. The rabbit should be confined to its indoor cage with food, water, toys and a tray for at least three to four days to reintroduce the toilet training.

While this is being implemented, the areas targeted with the urine or faeces must be thoroughly cleaned. It is a common misconception that products that remove the smell of urine to humans have the same effect on the animal responsible. Not so. Products containing ammonia (for example, bleach) can encourage the rabbit to over-mark the area. Disinfectants and floral odour removers mask the smell.

Cleaning with a warm solution of biological washing powder or liquid or using an enzymatic cleaner obtained through your surgery will ensure that the area is clean enough to allow the rabbit

supervised access. If the problem is severe, access to certain areas may have to be denied for long periods to truly break the habit. Punishment is never the answer.

There are times when a rabbit has developed a behaviour problem and owners are at a loss and need professional help. Advise them to bring the pet in for a health check. Seeking advice from a behaviour professional can be suggested.

Further reading

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