



Rabbits trained to follow good household etiquette will likely spend more time outside the cage—and will be happier, more social pets.

Tricks to Rabbit Training

It doesn't take an on-hand expert or an obedience class to train a rabbit. It takes treats, patience and a good sense of humor. By Lisa Plummer

The thought of a rabbit trick might conjure up the image of a bunny popping out of a magician's velvet top hat, but these very trainable animals can do much more than that. Rabbits can learn a variety of cute and useful behaviors, like using a litter box, coming when called, or playing fetch, all through positive reinforcement training.

"(Rabbits can learn) a lot more than you would think, but it depends on the temperament of the rabbit," said Dr. Karen Parker, author of *The Rabbit Handbook*. "Some are more agreeable than others and some of them have a higher desire to please or are more motivated by food than others. Some behaviors you can train for practical reasons and some just for the heck of it. Jumping, chewing, picking a toy—those types of things—can be based on their natural behaviors and you just expand on them."

Teaching rabbits good behaviors and cute tricks can be fun and relatively easy, but it's also instrumental in cultivating a better house pet. A rabbit that understands good house etiquette will likely spend more time outside its cage, resulting in a happier, more social pet. Most importantly, positive reinforcement training can help strengthen the human-rabbit relationship.

"When you work with any animal doing any sort of training and are using a positive reinforcement-type method, this is very rewarding to the animal and to you," said Dr. Susan Brown, an exotic animal veterinarian, trainer and applied-behavior consultant. "You're building a strong and powerful bond. It doesn't matter what you're teaching them, it's the experience of the animal interacting with you and getting something pleasurable in return, and you're getting something pleasurable by watching the animal

respond to what you're doing."

Learning new behaviors also keeps rabbits mentally alert and helps bring out a bunny's unique personality. In the wild, rabbits are prey animals that must strategize to survive. Training homebound rabbits offers environmental enrichment, filling that intellectual void.

Positive reinforcement training also can be invaluable in helping make the rabbit more comfortable with being groomed, having its nails cut or visiting the vet. When rewarded for sitting calmly during handling, the rabbit becomes more comfortable with its owner as well as other people and new surroundings.

Best of all, it doesn't take an on-hand expert or a special obedience class to train a rabbit. A handful of bunny treats, a healthy dose of patience and a good sense of humor should do it. That, and these tips.

Getting Started

First, decide what behaviors to teach. Then decide what marker or positive reinforcement cue to use. This could be a clicker, a sound or a special word that will identify desirable behaviors for the rabbit.

"Marking behavior is a way to tell the rabbit exactly what you want," said Brown. "For rabbits, use a softer clicker or the clicker end of a pen. For deaf rabbits, you can flash a flashlight, a laser pointer or [use] a hand signal. If you use your voice, use one word, and make it short and as consistent in tone as possible."

Marking should be followed by a food reward. Food is a strong motivator for rabbits, so desired behaviors should be reinforced with healthy treats, such as bite-sized portions of a favorite fruit,

Want to see rabbits do agility? Check this out: <http://tinyurl.com/5qhvjl>
Source: www.clickerbunny.com

vegetable, greens or some pellets. Avoid treats high in sugar, grain or anything that will compromise the rabbit's regular diet.

Next, rabbit-proof the training environment. Set the rabbit up for success by eliminating the potential for unwanted behaviors, such as chewing on electrical cords or expensive furniture. As the rabbit roams the supervised area, observe its natural behaviors, rewarding and reinforcing the ones you like by marking and treating.

"When you see a rabbit use a natural behavior, that would be a first step," said Parker. "You'd reward that behavior and maybe put a name, a hand signal or a sound to it. So the next time you give it that cue, over time and repetitively, it would make the association so you could get the rabbit to do it on command."

Training Basic Behaviors

Good behaviors to start with are those that will make the rabbit a better pet, like using a litter box, an easy behavior for rabbits to learn, according to Mary Lempert, the blogger behind TheRabbitAdvocate.com.

"Rabbits are naturally clean animals, so they prefer to use litter boxes," Lempert said. "Once a rabbit has been spayed or neutered, and the overwhelming urge to



Rabbits are natural jumpers, so training them to navigate hoops and other hurdles is pretty easy.

mark territory has been removed, most rabbits only need to be provided with a box and—poof!—they are litter-box trained."

Rabbits allowed to roam in a new environment will naturally pick a toilet area, usually in a corner. Put the litter box in the selected spot, even if that isn't where you want it to be permanently. To help the rabbit associate elimination with the litter box, soak up urine with a paper towel and pick up any droppings from its chosen toilet spot and place them in

the box. When the rabbit uses the box correctly, mark the behavior and give the rabbit a treat. Once it is accustomed to using the litter box, move the box to your preferred location.

"Providing a large, spacious litter box with the appropriate type of litter and lots of fresh hay are keys to encouraging box habits," Lempert said. "It is natural for rabbits to (eat) while defecating, so placing hay in the litter box is normal for them."

Choose litter appropriate for rabbits, such as those made from recycled newspaper, hay or straw. Many commercial cat litters can be toxic to bunnies, said Dr. Peter Helmer, a board-certified avian and exotic animal veterinarian.

"Generally, clay and clumping litters should be avoided due to dust and the potential to cause (gastrointestinal) problems if ingested," said Helmer. "Pine and cedar-based litter should also be avoided as the volatile fumes from these products may contribute to liver disease. Recycled newspaper litters ... are generally non-toxic and well-tolerated by rabbits."

Another good basic behavior is teaching the rabbit to come when it's called. Lempert suggests using small quantities of highly desirable treats, like raisins, to teach this behavior.

"The idea is basically Pavlovian conditioning," said Lempert. "You say their name and call them over. If you don't have a clicker, you can just make clicking noises with your mouth. When they do arrive, make the clicking sound and give them a raisin. Try this a few times in a row to reinforce the idea and

A Trick to Try: Jumping On Cue

A BUNNY CAN jump over a pole, through a hoop, onto a platform or into a basket. Follow these steps to teach a bunny to jump over a pole—or adapt them to other situations:

- Set up a training area with a non-skid surface, and place a wooden dowel or other bar on the floor. Use a target stick to guide the rabbit over the bar. Click when its back feet go over. Sometimes rabbits will jump over an object just because it is there. Terrific! When you click, make sure you click at the height of the jump.
- Raise one end of the bar about an inch. Use the target stick to lead the rabbit across. Click when its back feet go over the bar—or when the rabbit jumps on its own.
- Set both ends of the bar about one

inch off the ground. (To avoid injury, make sure the bar will fall if the rabbit bumps it.) Click when the bunny crosses the bar. Don't click if it knocks the bar over. Use baby steps to raise the bar to the point that the rabbit is jumping, rather than stepping, over it.

- Add a verbal cue, like "jump." Give the cue, then present the target stick, if necessary, on the other side. Next, fade the target stick from the picture: Give the verbal cue, but don't present the target stick. Click your bunny for jumping the bar.

- Gradually place the rabbit a few inches farther from the jump. Cue the jump. Keep at it, using baby steps to add distance between the rabbit and the jump.

Source: Joan Orr, www.clickerbunny.com

then practice every day. Teaching a rabbit to come when called can take as little as three to five minutes.”

The same method can be applied to teach a rabbit to enter and exit its hutch on command or jump up on the couch.

Teaching Advanced Tricks

Once the rabbit has learned basic behaviors, it's ready to move on to tricks like playing fetch or jumping over obstacles.

Targeting is a good method to teach such tricks. First, the rabbit learns to touch a body part, such as its nose, to an object. When the rabbit touches the target—a chopstick or wooden spoon, for example—mark the behavior and give a treat.

“Teaching an animal to target is a super

easy skill because it's natural for them to touch something with their nose,” said Brown. “Once they do something, you give them a cue, such as a word or click. They learn that whenever they see the stick, they need to touch it with their nose. Once they've got it, you can move it away ... so they'll follow the targeted object. Some animals figure it out fast and most are targeting in one to five targeting sessions.”

As the rabbit learns to touch and follow the target, it can be led through a variety of desired behaviors, such as jumping over or moving through an obstacle. Rabbits are natural jumpers, so training them to jump over hurdles is a fun and easy feat for them to learn.

Training sessions should be short—10

minutes tops—interesting and fun, and end on a positive note. Once the rabbit begins building its repertoire and becomes more engaged with the learning process, training sessions can be extended, but a trainer can never expect to hold a rabbit's attention for half an hour, said Parker.

Stopping Negative Behaviors

Cute tricks are one thing, but rabbit training also can be used to stop negative behaviors, such as teaching a bunny to stop chewing on the underside of the couch. When it comes to discouraging negative behaviors in rabbits, remember that old saying: An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

One of the best courses of action is to remove temptation, according to Marguerite Pastella, of the website BunnyMomma.com.

“While personalities cannot necessarily be changed by training, giving the bunny the best possible environment in which to develop can go a long way in promoting good behavior,” said Pastella. “Destructive habits are often curbed by providing a good assortment of toys and materials to keep the bunny occupied and entertained. Creative cord placement and protection is essential for anyone desiring to give their rabbit free roam in their home. It's hardly fair to blame a rabbit for chewing through a cord that was blocking access to its favorite spot.”

Physical punishment, a loud voice or anything that scares the rabbit should never be used to stop negative behaviors, said Helmer, because they can create a frightened or aggressive rabbit.

“The best way to stop negative behaviors is to train a different behavior that is incompatible with the first,” said Helmer. “For instance, if a bunny is biting when picked up out of the cage, then perhaps it is due to territorial aggression. The rabbit can be trained to first hop out of the cage and then be picked up.”

Reinforcing Learned Behaviors

Once trained behaviors are learned and ingrained, food treats can be given less frequently and replaced with other forms of positive reinforcement, like praise and petting. However, treats should never be eliminated entirely, as occasional food rewards help to maintain desired behaviors, said Brown.

Rabbit Training Tips

ANIMALS DON'T AUTOMATICALLY come into our lives knowing what we want, so it's our job to teach them in a positive and constructive way.

Rabbits will learn to fear and avoid people who constantly yell at them. It's better, experts say, to use in-cage timeouts, followed by redirecting the bunny into a more desirable behavior. Punishment may be effective in stopping a behavior quickly, but in the long run will only work to break the rabbit-trainer bond.

Rabbits shouldn't be forced into anything, either. Training should be positive, upbeat, fun and interesting. Training is a process, so expecting too much too quickly or pressuring the rabbit will only cause confusion and make it lose interest and enthusiasm. If training a certain behavior seems to be taking a long time, it's probably the training approach at fault, not the rabbit.

Here are some effective training tips:

- **Set up for success.** Rabbit-proof the area to be used for training sessions. For instance, hide or cover telephone wires or block access to anything you don't want the rabbit to chew. Prevention is better than discipline.
- **Have a plan.** Know where you want to go with training sessions. If

there are no objectives, the animal will be confused and won't be able to follow or progress.

- **Focus on positive goals.** Rather than concentrate only on stopping bad behavior, spend time teaching desirable behaviors. For example, give the rabbit chew toys rather than scold it for gnawing on your coffee table.

- **Train in small steps.** Short, 10-minute sessions a couple of times a day should be sufficient when teaching new behaviors. Training is a process, so build as you go.

- **Observe carefully.** If the rabbit is losing interest, adjust the training exercises to make them more interesting or end the session and try again later.

- **Use positive reinforcement.** Always reward desirable behaviors with treats, petting or praise. When you see the rabbit naturally do something you like, reward it to help reinforce the behavior. Never use physical discipline or do anything that involves throwing something at the rabbit or scaring it with a loud noise.

- **Be patient.** Rabbits are individuals that have varying levels of intelligence, attention spans and willingness to learn. Some may need more time to learn than others.

Source: www.clickerbunny.com

“Once the behavior is solid and reoccurring, you still need to reinforce it whenever you ask for it, but that reinforcer may change from always being a treat to being petted, played with or given a toy,” said Brown. “Once you get a behavior on cue, you need to reinforce it every time with something. What drops out is the marker, the clicker or marker word that’s only used during the training process. That’s only a learning tool, so once they have the name for it and they’re doing it, there’s no reason to use a clicker anymore because they’re not doing anything new.”

Once a bunny’s engaged in the joy of learning, there’s no limit to the fun things to teach it, whether it be jumping



Rabbits are smart, easily trainable animals that can learn lots of tricks. Here, Minnie walks on her hind legs in order to get a treat.

over obstacles, ringing a bell to get food, rolling a ball into a cup or jumping up on the couch to cuddle.

These tricks can be cute and entertaining. However, what matters most is that working with a pet in a fun and loving

way helps the trainer and the rabbit develop a special bond sure to last a lifetime. ■

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