



Potter League  
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## HOUSE RABBIT BEHAVIOR

It is easier to train rabbits if you understand that their behavior is usually motivated by one of three things:

- Their natural need and inclination to chew and dig
- Their need to communicate and our tendency to require words for understanding communication
- The social structure as seen by rabbits, in which all members of the family relate to them by way of a pecking (nipping?) order.

### Litter-box Training

By nature, rabbits choose one or a few places, usually corners, to deposit their urine and most of their droppings, also known as pills. Urine training involves little more than putting a clean litter box in the corner where the rabbit chooses to go. Pill training requires only that you give the rabbit a place that will not be invaded by others.

Here are some suggestions to help you to train your rabbit to use the litter box:

Start with a litter box in his cage and one or more boxes in the rabbit's running space. If he urinates in a corner of the cage not containing the box, move the box to that corner until he gets it right. Don't be concerned if your bunny curls up in his litter box; this is natural. Once he is using the litter box in the cage, open the door and allow him into his running space. Watch him go in and out on his own. If he heads to a corner where there is no box or lifts up his tail in the characteristic fashion, cry "no" in a single, sharp burst of sound, then gently herd him back to the cage and litter box, or into one of the boxes in his room.

Be careful, however. You don't want to make the cage or the litter box seem like punishment. A handful of hay in the box makes it a more welcoming place. After he first uses the box, praise him and give him a favorite treat. Once he uses the litter box in his room a couple of times, you're well on your way, as his habits will be on their way to forming.

As your rabbit gets better trained in his first room, you can increase his space. Don't hurry this process; go slow. If the area becomes very big or includes a second floor, be sure to include more litter boxes so as not to confuse him. Remember, as he becomes more confident and uses fewer boxes, you can start to remove some of his early "training" boxes. Get your rabbit into a daily routine and try not to vary it. Rabbits are very habitual and once a routine is established, they usually prefer to stick with it.

All rabbits will drop pills around their cages to mark them as their own. This is not a failure to be litter-box trained. It is very important for your rabbit to identify the cage as his property so that when he leaves the cage for the bigger world of your house, he will distinguish the family's area from his own and avoid marking it. To encourage this, make the rabbit the king of his cage. Try not to force him in or out of it; instead, coax him.



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Do not do things to his cage that he doesn't like, and do not do things to him that he doesn't like, such as giving medicine, while he's inside the cage.

The trick to getting the rabbit to keep his pills in the cage is to give him ownership of his cage and respect the cage as his:

- Don't reach into the cage to take him out; open the door and let him come out if and when he wants to.
- Don't catch him and put him back in the cage or it will be his prison, not his home. Herd him back gently and let him choose to go in to get away from you. Tip: Try walking behind your rabbit, clapping your hands and saying "bedtime." The rabbit will learn that this annoying human behavior will not stop until he goes into his cage, and over time, it will become a regular part of his routine (unless he feels that he hasn't gotten his fair share of time outside the cage). It's a bit like a child going home and closing the door because the other kids are calling her names. They may make the playground an unpleasant place for her, but they can't bother her in her own home!
- If the rabbit has been snuggling with you, it's OK to carry him to the door of the cage and let him go in. Just don't put him directly into the cage, and never chase and trap him to put him in the cage.
- Don't reach into the cage to get food dishes. Anchor them near the door of the cage so they can be filled with a minimum of trespassing into the cage, or wait until the rabbit is out to fill them.
- Don't clean the cage while the rabbit is in it. Always wait until he comes out. He'll come over and supervise you, even help you move things around that you've set down outside the cage, but as long as he isn't in the cage he won't see your cleaning as an invasion of his territory.

## Communication

Rabbits are often misinterpreted. They are usually silent pets with subtle body language. One of the most common myths is that the rabbit is timid. This misconception stems from the rabbit's instinctive reaction to noises and fast movements. This behavior is a survival trait common to most bunnies.

Rabbits have a language all their own, and here are some tips to help you interpret your bunny's hops, kicks and grunts.

### Rabbit vocalizations

**Grunting/growling:** Indicates anger or disapproval of a human's or another rabbit's behavior (invasion of their territory, for example) and may be followed by scratching or biting.

Translation: "Back off. Leave me alone. Put me down."

**Buzzing:** Clicking or buzzing of the teeth that indicates pleasure and contentment.

Translation: "I am a happy rabbit. I am completely relaxed and comfortable, and I'm in love with you!"



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**Tooth grinding:** Indicates severe pain, discomfort or distress.

Translation: "I'm in great pain and need help."

**Whimpering, squealing and squeaks:** Associated with pain and distress.

Translation: "That hurt! I don't feel well."

Some squeaking is done in close, intimate situations and is an indication of closeness.

**Screaming:** Indicates mortal terror or severe pain.

Translation: "I think I am going to die and I'm terrified."

### Non-vocalizations

**Bunny 500:** Running through the house at top speed, alone or chasing you or another rabbit just for the fun of it.

Translation: "I'm playing and having a great time!"

**Binky:** A jump straight up with a mid-air half turn and a twist, usually executed in mid-run.

Translation: "I am joyful!"

**Boxing:** Rabbit stands on hind legs with his dukes up and throws punches.

Translation: "One step more and I'll punch your lights out."

**Bunching:** Pushing, pulling and biting bed linens, towels or pillows.

Translation: "I like to organize until everything is just right."

**Bunny loaf:** Rabbit's front and back legs are tucked underneath the body. Rabbit looks like she could fit into a loaf pan. Rabbits often sleep in this position.

Translation: "I'm chill and comfortable."

**Bunny rug:** Rabbit is lying with belly next to the floor, rear legs stretched out behind and front legs stretched out in front. Rabbit may also lie on his/her side.

Translation: "I'm relaxed and comfortable. I may take a nap."

**Burrowing:** Tunneling behavior.

Translation: "My ancestors dug out their own homes before there were house rabbits."

**Chewing:** A natural behavior.

Translation: "I must keep my teeth ground down. I must clear away these vines (electrical cords, etc.) that are encroaching on the entrance to my burrow."

**Chinning:** Rubbing secretions from the scent glands under the chin to mark the rabbit's territory. The scent is undetectable to humans.

Translation: "I've been here. This is mine."

**Circling:** Circling around their human's feet or another rabbit can be part of a courtship dance or a means of getting attention. Buzzing (vocalization) can also accompany circling.

Translation: "I think I'm in love. I want you to notice me. I'm going to get you."

**Climbing:** Exploring and play behavior.

Translation: "Indiana Jones has nothing on me."

**Digging:** A natural behavior. It may also be a displacement behavior when the rabbit is angry but not going to attack.



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Translation: "I must dig a burrow. I must clear a place to lie down. I must escape. I need some attention or I have to go to the bathroom (usually done on their human's chest or lap)."

**Ear position:** A rabbit's sonar to determine what is going on around him.

Translation: Both ears forward: "Something has my complete attention."

One ear forward, one ear back: "I am listening to you and to something else."

Both ears back against head: "I am really scared right now. I am submissive. I am about to attack." (Tail is also erect and the body is tensed.)

**Eyes:** Third eyelid showing in the corner of the eye.

Translation: "I am uneasy. I am stressed. I am afraid."

**Flop:** Rabbit literally throws herself onto her side, which looks like she just keeled over.

Translation: "Life is wonderful, and I am ready to relax and take a nap."

**Invitation/demand to be groomed:** Rabbit comes up to you, gives you a nudge and puts his head down to the floor in an extended position with ears at the side of the head, and awaits your attention.

Translation: "I am in the mood for love. Pet me now."

**Licking:** An expression of affection that has nothing to do with salt.

Translation: "I love you. I trust you."

**Lunging:** A sign of disapproval.

Translation: "Get away! What are you doing?" (with attitude)

**Mounting:** Mating or dominance behavior.

Translation: "I feel like making love. Let's not forget that I am top rabbit."

**Nipping:** Feels like a little pinch and can mean several things (it is not the rabbit's intention to bite).

Translation: "I want your attention now. I like you petting me, so I will groom you. Move out of the way now. This is a warning."

**Nose nudge:** Rabbit bonks you with his nose.

Translation: "Pay attention to me. Pet me. Get out of my way."

**Periscoping:** Rabbit stands up on hind legs and looks around.

Translation: "I'm checking things out."

**Tail movements:** When erect, a sign of interest or aggression. When wagging, it's a form of defiance or back talk.

Translation: "Wow, that's interesting. You have just plucked my last nerve and I'm going to do something about it. I don't want to; you can't make me."

**Throwing:** A play behavior or a demonstration of anger.

Translation: "This is great fun, and it makes noise too! I am really ticked off."

**Thumping:** Expression of anger or territory warning.

Translation: "I'm angry! There's danger! Get away from my space!"