

Get A Rabbit To Cooperate

For a cooperative rabbit spend quality time with your pet.

By Caroline Charland

Rabbit Trixie/© Courtesy David Sumida
Understanding your rabbit can help you get it to cooperate with you.

Does your rabbit come to you when called? Can you pick it up and hold your rabbit without being scratched? Does your rabbit sit still to be groomed? Can you get your rabbit into a carrier for a trip to the vet? As a rabbit rescuer, the answer I often hear is "No." It seems to me that most rabbits have their humans under their control.

People often tell me they cannot pick up their rabbits — that their rabbits just won't cooperate. At our weekend adoption and education events, we usually have a line of people with their rabbits in carriers waiting for one of our free nail trims because their rabbits won't let them do this 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.

Half of the time, I think it is the people who are having the hard time and the rabbits just have them fooled.

So why the noncooperation? Rabbits prefer to have all four feet on the ground — it makes for a quicker get away in case a predator happens by and that is part of the reason a rabbit may resist being picked up. Rabbits are built low to the ground, and, even though they might jump up onto the couch or onto a bed, they are not climbers like cats.

How does an owner get his or her rabbit to cooperate? It starts with spending time with your rabbit at its comfort level.

Step 1: Get To Know Your Rabbit

When you first bring a rabbit home, give it a safe place to call its own. Even if your rabbit will eventually have full run of the house or a room, keep it in an exercise pen for the first week or so.

This does a couple of things:

1. Your rabbit has its own space to call home
2. Rabbits litter train better in an enclosed area such as a pen rather than in a large room.

After a few days, open the pen so your rabbit can come out for some exploring and run about time. Rabbit-proof any room your rabbit has access to by removing poisonous plants, covering all electric cords and locking up cleaners and other chemicals.

Step 2: Get down to A Rabbit's Level

Lie down on your tummy. You might want to rest your head on a pillow or across your arms because you could be in this position for awhile. Rabbits, after all, like to interact on their own terms. Rabbits are curious creatures that explore every object in their vicinity.

Your rabbit will eventually approach to investigate you. After a while, it might even settle down by you and allow you to stroke its head and ears. Don't force your rabbit to interact with you. Instead, allow it to be in charge of the interaction. This will foster the trust between you.

Step 3: Interact On Your Rabbit's Terms

Crouch down to your rabbit's level. Gently stroke its head, and talk calmly. Your rabbit might run when you approach, especially this is its usual routine either with you or in its previous home. If this is the case, you will need to work at gaining your rabbit's trust.

Sit on the ground, and wait for the rabbit to come up to you. Once this happens, hold your hand out with a treat in it, such as a couple of sprigs of parsley or cilantro. Eventually your rabbit will approach you to eat the treat. Do this a couple of times each day, without trying to pick your rabbit up. This will teach the rabbit that interaction with you doesn't always involve you picking it up.

Some rabbits are shy than others, so they might take longer to come around to you. If this is the case, spend time on the floor in the rabbit's living quarters. Just sit and read and spend time in there. Your rabbit's curiosity will likely propel

it toward you to investigate. With time, your pet will want your attention and to spend time with you.

Step 4. Click With Your Rabbit

If you have a hard time getting your rabbit to come to you, make a clicking sound with your tongue, or use a clicker every time you feed your rabbit, and/or call your rabbit by its name. This is a super way to get your rabbit to associate a specific noise with food.

All of my rabbits know that when they hear the clicking sound or their names being called that that means to come to me. I started this by making a clicking sound and/or saying their names while offering a small, healthy treat. Now they come when I call them, even if I'm not offering a treat., because they associate good things with the click.

Only give healthy treats, such as veggies, untreated rose petals and herbs like rosemary or bay leaves. The good thing about hand-feeding a treat to your rabbit is that it will not just associate your hands with being picked up. It will remember your hands offered treats, too.