

Rabbit Play Outside The Cage

Give your rabbit the upper hand in interaction and it might just clamor for your attention.

By the Editors of Rabbits USA

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You might have a one-bunny household, but that doesn't mean your rabbit should be left alone. Wild rabbits live in colonies, interacting with one another as one big family. Pet rabbits deserve social interaction as well, whether that interaction comes from a fellow rabbit or from you. What's that you say? Your rabbit does an about-face and hops in the opposite direction whenever you enter its space?

Not all pet rabbits take to people from the get-go. After all, from your rabbit's point of view, you fit the bill as far as predators go. You're much bigger, with eyes set in front, and you probably tend to make what your rabbit perceives as sudden, potentially threatening movements. Chasing a rabbit in an attempt to pick it up only cements its predator-out-to-get-it opinion of you.

Does this mean you are relegated to simply feeding and cleaning up after your rabbit? No! You can turn things around with a little patience (OK, sometimes a lot) and a basic understanding of how your rabbit prefers to be approached. The key term here is "trust," as in earning your rabbit's trust.

Once your rabbit finds that hanging out with you comes with many positives — a yummy treat, a nice head scratch, perhaps even a gentle rabbit massage — don't be surprised to feel a little bunny nudge as your pet tries to get your attention.

Tips To Gain Your Rabbit's Trust

See things from your rabbit's point of view — literally. Lie down on the floor in front of your rabbit, and allow it to investigate you. If your pet is in a relaxed posture (with its feet stretched out behind and/or paws in front of it), try a gentle pat on the head or ear rub. Many rabbits like their cheeks rubbed. Avoid reaching for your rabbit's back area for now, because it might view your arm looming overhead as threatening, causing it to hop away. Signs that your rabbit is enjoying this interaction include: a nose nudge or two to your hand, or placing its head under your hand if you stop petting it, as if to say "Don't stop!"

Close off an area of a room, sit down and simply observe your rabbit as it hops about. Chances are your rabbit will thoroughly explore the room and the objects it comes across, which includes you. Your rabbit may initially come up to you and then quickly hop away. Oftentimes, it is simply taking a quick perusal of its environment — seeing what's around it, only to go back to each item already discovered.

Allow your rabbit to approach you on its own terms. Put your hand out for your pet to smell it, or have a nutritious treat ready in your hand as a nice surprise. Whatever you do, don't chase your rabbit or grab at it when it does come up to you. Instead, allow your rabbit to be in control of the situation. The goal here is for your rabbit to view you as non-threatening. Since you also provide treats, visiting you comes with a yummy bonus.

The safest place for you to interact with your rabbit is on the floor. Petting your rabbit while holding it and standing can be potentially dangerous if it becomes startled and attempts to flee (i.e. scratching your arms and thrashing about). Even somewhat timid rabbits are more likely to accept interaction if it takes place on the floor, where the rabbit doesn't have to worry about potential falls and can get up and go at a moment's notice. Likewise, once the rabbit has memorized the room layout and knows all potential "escape routes," it might feel more comfortable and allow you to approach.

Once a rabbit feels at home in the home, and around you, it will lay claim to various areas and furnishings. Some rabbits will happily hop on the couch to be with you as you watch TV or read a book, even hopping straight onto your lap, just like a cat or dog would.

Proper handling early on goes a long way in establishing trust with your rabbit. Make sure your arms fully support your rabbit's body, especially the hindquarters, and that its feet rest against your body. It only takes an accidental drop or two for a rabbit to become wary of being handled.

