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Communication

The key to reading body language is looking at the whole picture. Instead of just assessing how your rabbit carries its ears, assess how its ears, tail, eyes, and whole body position fit together. Keep in mind that communication can be hindered in some rabbits because of their inherent breed characteristics. For example, lop-eared rabbits cannot maneuver their ears to the same degree as Dutch rabbits, and the long fur coat of the Angora rabbit can mask body signals. Following are a few common behaviors that rabbits use to communicate, but they need to be looked at in context.

Relaxed

- Lying down on stomach, side, or back (only when extremely relaxed)
- Legs stretched out or tucked up underneath
- Ears partially up (attuned to potential danger) or lazily lain back
- Eyes partially or fully closed
- Sometimes makes a tooth purr (see later)

Alert

- Standing on all four feet or stretched up on hind legs
- Ears up and honing in on sounds
- Eyes open and watching
- Sometimes carefully patrols the territory

Scared

- Crouched down low and ready to flee
- Ears tightly flattened against the neck
- Eyes wide open
- Usually flees to a safe place

Do not approach your rabbit if it looks like this, especially if it is cornered. You may increase its fear to the point that it bites out of self-defense. Also, do not try to comfort your rabbit if it looks like this. Giving it attention when it is frightened will only reinforce frightened behavior. Instead, try to find out what frightens your rabbit, and remove the scary stimulus. If you act like nothing is wrong, it is hoped that the rabbit will follow your lead and become less afraid.

Running in Circles Around Your Feet

When your rabbit runs in circles around your feet, it is not trying to trip you. Rather, it is expressing love (part of the courtship ritual) or is just excited.

Information cited from:

Mayer, J and Donnelly, T., eds. Clinical Veterinary Advisor: Birds and Exotic Pets. Elsevier, Philadelphia, PA. 2013. ISBN: 9781-4160-3969-3

Binkying

A binky is performed by jumping up in the air and vigorously twisting or kicking while airborne. Although most people have never seen one, it is unmistakable once an owner witnesses a binky for the first time. When it does this, your rabbit is extremely happy.

Head Shaking

Head shaking can have different meanings and should be looked at in context. It can mean that your rabbit is not happy with the situation (e.g., after it is prevented from entering an off-limit room), or that it is happy (e.g., preceding a binky). If the rabbit frequently shakes its head and scratches its ears, it may have a medical problem, such as an ear infection, that needs medical attention.

Leaping, Hopping, and Racing Around

These usually come in spurts and express happiness.

Grooming

Your rabbit will groom only in situations in which it is relaxed. Grooming between rabbits is a form of bonding. Who is grooming and who is being groomed are dictated by the relationship. If your rabbit grooms you, it is expressing affection and trust.

Tooth Grinding

Two degrees of tooth grinding have different meanings. It can be hard for new owners to tell rabbits apart, but by paying attention to the context, you will soon be able to hear the difference.

- *Louder.* When tooth grinding is loud, the rabbit is stressed or in pain. If it is loudly grinding its teeth and you cannot identify a cause (such as the vacuum cleaner), the rabbit may have a painful medical problem that needs attention.
- *Softer.* When tooth grinding is soft, it is called a tooth purr and indicates that the rabbit is happy or content.

Thumping

This sound is made when your rabbit quickly and powerfully pounds its hind foot on the ground. It can have a few different meanings:

- The rabbit perceives danger and wants to alert everyone.
- Someone is too close, and the rabbit wants the person to back off.
- The rabbit wants to get your attention.

Kicking Hind Feet

If your rabbit kicks its hind feet, this usually means that it is displeased. If the rabbit kicks when you pick it up, it does not feel secure. If the rabbit runs off and kicks its feet after you do something unpleasant (e.g., prevent her from entering an off-limit room), it is expressing displeasure.

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Screaming

Your rabbit will scream only when it is under severe distress or in pain. If you hear this, the rabbit may need immediate medical attention.

Nose Nudging

Your rabbit will nudge you with its nose to get your attention.

Biting vs. Nipping

Biting and nipping are not the same. Biting is more forceful and breaks the skin, whereas nipping is gentler and usually does not break the skin. Biting and nipping have different meanings. Your rabbit may bite you because of fear, aggression, or territoriality. Your rabbit may nip you to gain your attention or to get you to move. If your rabbit is biting you, consult your veterinarian for advice on how to manage this problem.

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