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MUTUALLY REWARDING RABBIT-HUMAN INTERACTIONS

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As rabbit owners, we want our rabbits to have long, healthy, happy lives, and to enjoy spending time with us. To achieve this, we need to interact with our rabbits in ways that we both enjoy. If we interact with rabbits in ways that cause fear, pain, or distress, our rabbits will become stressed, which affects both their health and their desire to spend time with us.

Choice is important

Most owners recognise the sorts of interactions that rabbits don't like. Rabbits don't like being picked up, being restrained, being 'tranced' or being frustrated, for example, having their movement restricted or their food withdrawn. There are a variety of ways that rabbits like to interact with people, and these are usually very context dependent. Interactions are only pleasurable for the rabbit if it has some degree of choice over its interaction: if a rabbit does not want to engage with a person, then even being stroked on the head may cause frustration or fear, rather than pleasure.

Mutually rewarding rabbit-human interactions include:

- Social grooming
- Resting in proximity
- Giving food
- Giving new toys
- Training

Let's look at these each in turn.

Social grooming

If you keep rabbits together, you will see social allogrooming behaviours - this is when one animal acts to clean and maintain the appearance of another individual of the same species. Allogrooming can be



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spontaneous or actively solicited (by lowering the head towards the other rabbit). Owners can mimic these behaviours by using similar signals, which gives the rabbit choice over how it responds.

Rather than going straight in to stroke the rabbit (especially if the rabbit is not actively soliciting attention), we can 'ask' the rabbit whether it wants physical interaction by offering a closed fist, near the ground in front of the rabbit's face. If the rabbit wishes to be groomed, it will lower the head. If the rabbit withdraws, or does not lower the head, it does not want to be stroked. We need to respect this. And be careful if your rabbit shows aggressive behaviour towards you - you need to resolve this behaviour otherwise you may get bitten.

Male rabbits are more likely to come up and 'ask' to be stroked - one study found that male rabbits were three times more likely to display contact-seeking behaviour than female rabbits. However, this does not necessarily mean that female rabbits do not want social interactions: most will happily choose to interact despite showing fewer contact-seeking behaviours.

When we stroke, scratch, or pet rabbits, we should focus on the head and ears, which is where rabbits like to be touched. Sometimes, owners who have been bitten by their pets may feel cautious about touching the rabbits on the face, and so may be more inclined to stroke them on the back as it is further from the teeth! However, between rabbits, contact on the back tends to be sexually motivated, so is less acceptable to most rabbits if they expect to be groomed. When we offer choice and respect the rabbit's choice, we can feel much more confident of stroking the rabbit on the face, which will be more rewarding for both us and our rabbits.

Resting in proximity

If your rabbits live in your house, you will often find that they choose to spend time in the same room as you, even when you're not interacting with them. This is because rabbits gain an advantage from spending time in large groups, as there are more animals alert to signs of danger. Therefore, merely being in visual contact with their owners can be rewarding to rabbits.

Giving food

Rabbits like food, and humans like watching things eat. We can give food from our hands to build trust, to reinforce desired behaviours, or to strengthen our relationship with a rabbit. When we hand-feed rabbits, they learn that rather than being a source of fear, human hands can be a source of reward, and this knowledge is essential for positive reinforcement training.

As the rabbit becomes more confident with us, we can give food rewards for specific behaviours, such as recall (covered more in the training section below). This will increase the response of the rabbit when behaviours are required. When we want to give our rabbit a piece of vegetable or some leaves, even just calling them over (i.e. practicing recall) will give the rabbit more choice and reward desirable behaviours.

Giving new toys

Rabbits do not play with toys in the same way that humans or dogs do. Rabbit-specific play behaviours, by contrast, are primarily social (chasing, displacing other rabbits) and are barely present in adulthood. Rabbit functional play behaviours are mostly locomotor, such as short sprints or binkying.

Rabbits kept with other rabbits are unlikely to interact with toys for a prolonged period unless there is a good motivation to do so. When a novel object is placed in the environment, most rabbits will investigate it to see if it is dangerous or rewarding. If the former, they will avoid it; if the latter, they will engage more with it; and if neither, they are likely to ignore it unless it is impeding access to another resource, when they will attempt to move it out of the way. Rabbits kept on their own may be more likely to engage with less interesting toys from boredom and lack of social stimulation.

Toys that will be reinforcing to both our rabbits and ourselves need to comprise a food reward: either because the whole item is consumable (tree branches) or because food can be hidden within it (such as a puzzle feeding ball). Rabbits detect food through scent, so the food does not need to be visible. Destructible, manoeuvrable toys, such as scrunched cardboard or paper containing food rewards allow rabbits to show a range of normal behaviours (biting and digging) in the process of accessing the food.



Photo: E Hunt

Training

Training is a very good way of strengthening the human-animal bond as it is reinforcing for both the trainer and the animal. For the rabbit, the process of learning is stimulating and reinforcing, and the owner becomes a source of food rewards and fun. For the owner, watching a rabbit respond to training is reinforcing, and increases positive feelings towards the rabbit. Additionally, putting behaviours on cue may help owners to avoid situations that they find more stressful (such as catching the rabbit).

Conclusion

The more we understand what rabbits like and what they need, the better we can meet their welfare needs. When we interact with our rabbit in a way that is pleasurable for both of us, we strengthen the relationship between us. We find the rabbit more rewarding, and the rabbit finds us more rewarding - a positive feedback loop that benefits everyone!



Photo: D Staggs