

Fostering Fearful or Feisty Rabbits



Tips & Tricks:

***Treats are the best reinforcement!**

Use things like greens, peppers, oranges or other treats to help establish that bond with your foster bun!

****Thumping noises (from a rabbit slamming it's back feet into the floor) is a clear sign that your rabbit is feeling frustrated or unhappy!**

What is Flooding? :

Flooding is prolonged exposure to a stimulus, regardless of the rabbit's response, until they stop reacting. Many think handling a frightened pet is desensitizing them to touch. True desensitization is done when an animal is not fearful and can tolerate and even enjoy the interaction. Flooding causes learned helplessness and emotional damage, teaching fearful pets to tolerate touch and contact instead of seeking it. NEAS does not use forced handling and relies on positive reinforcement.

Let the rabbit become adjusted to it's new environment :

- Set up their exercise pen before you let them out of their carrier.
- Set the carrier in their pen and let them hop out on their own.
- Spend lots of time in the room their pen is in, speaking to them quietly and offering fresh vegetables as treats.
 - Treat their pen as their space; if they don't want to be pet while in their pen, that's okay!
 - Sit on the ground with greens during out of cage time and let them come to you.
 - Once they seem more confident, you can try to pet them, but if they retreat, that's fine.
 - When it's time for them to go back into their room put greens or pellets in there so they will go in on their own.
 - It may take some time but be patient!

Conditioning the rabbit to being handled:

- Use greens or treats to create a positive association with being pet and handled.
 - Once your rabbit is acclimated to you and their environment try petting their head when they come up to you for greens.
 - Start small, try petting their head once or twice- If they let you great! Try again in a couple minutes
- If they run away or lunge at your hands it just means they aren't ready yet, keep hanging out and talking to them.
 - Once they are comfortable with a few head pets (putting head low and not panting or nose twitching) slowly increase the amount of time you are petting them and soon you will be able to do it without treats!
 - This may take a while, as feisty rabbits need time to trust you.

*** Most rabbits do not like to be picked up or held and may never let you do so. Don't try until you have a very good relationship with your foster rabbit.**

Cage Aggression in Rabbits:

Rabbits will display aggressive behavior when they are feeling scared or when they are defending their territory. Less common causes of aggression include stress, boredom, or even pain. If your foster bunny lunges or bites when you reach into the enclosure, please let your foster manager know about the behavior and take notes on things like frequency, and what is happening before or after the incident.



These rabbits that will attack your hand if you reach into their cage but will be perfectly happy with you petting them in a separate location. Avoid reaching in and removing things from your rabbits enclosure while they are inside it.

Cleaning an Enclosure with a Feisty Rabbit:

- Initially, let them out of their pen and give them some out of cage time (and some greens) while you are cleaning their pen
- Once they are comfortable with you and their environment you can start to work on cleaning the pen with them inside. This can be done through clicker training. Click the clicker and give them a treat, do this several times for several days until they know what the sound means.
- Go into the pen and touch some of their things
 - Whenever they allow this, click and treat
 - Whenever they lunge at you stand your ground rather than rewarding this behavior by leaving. You may need some protective gear such as long sleeves, boots and gloves.
- Do this every day until they stop lunging.
- Once they are no longer lunging, you should still click and treat intermittently to reinforce good behavior rather than removing the reward altogether.

Nipping Vs Biting:

A light nip from a rabbit is very different from a bite. Nipping is a light pinch a rabbit will give you with their teeth. While a hard nip might occasionally leave a red mark on your skin, it should never *break* the skin. Most rabbits will nip you at some point, but it's not an aggressive behavior. A rabbit might nip you when:

- They are annoyed and want you to go away.
- You are preventing them from doing something- ie, holding them when they want to explore, blocking them from going somewhere, etc.
- They are trying to groom you- particularly on clothing items.