



# Coping with unfriendly rabbits...

## Background

Many problems with pet rabbits are because they simply aren't given enough company, stimulation or exercise. Rabbits that bite and attack when they are fed are usually showing that they feel lonely, frightened and miserable.

Most animals have no other way of expressing their feelings, other than to get cross and display what we call, bad behaviour. We tend to shun that which we don't like or understand. This is no more apparent than when a rabbit is ignored because of its behaviour.

Rabbits are chastised for their behaviour and we also feel justified in keeping them in small hutches, feeling that they deserve to be treated badly as a punishment for their behaviour.

What we actually need to do to solve the problems of an unfriendly rabbit is to give them more stimulation, more time, and above all, more space and kindness.

Rabbits love to run and jump, they love to chase each other and investigate new things. Rabbits should always have company, definitely not with guinea pigs, they often end up dominating or killing them.

## Starting to make contact

Try using a stick with a padded end, to stroke the rabbit whilst feeding them a tasty treat such as a carrot or dry toast. Give them plenty of time and patience, something like 1 minute, twice a day, is enough to start with.

As the rabbit gets used to your presence, you should be able to start using your hand to stroke them. If they can't cope with that, remember that they are only doing the best they can to prevent you doing something they don't understand. Just go back to using the stick for a little longer before trying your hand again.

Once they see you aren't a threat, move on to trying to pick them up. Start by just getting them used to having hands on and around them.

Once they accept this, you can move onto gently picking them up. To begin with do it slowly and low to the ground so that they feel they could escape if they wanted to.

When you can pick them up close to the ground, move on to holding them close to you. When you are holding

them close, cradle and hold them firmly, this is to both give them confidence that they aren't going to fall, but also to ensure that if they panic they won't just spring from your arms and hurt themselves falling.

Rabbits have evolved to escape explosively, so wear something thick when first picking them up as they have a tendency to escape by kicking hard.

We have been reminded recently, that in general, rabbits don't like being picked up and unless they genuinely enjoy the contact, they probably feel happier on their own four paws.

## Increasing stimulation

Along with the above strategy of introducing them to being touched and picked up, it is always a good idea to provide rabbits with stimulation and company.

We would recommend a hutch large enough for each rabbit in it to be able to stretch out completely and stand to their full height.

Rabbits should have access to a permanent run where they can get exercise and find things to do. The run should be high enough for them to stand up and should be large enough for them to get a good run round.

We would suggest a minimum size of 2x5 metres, but the larger the better.

In the run you can leave fruit tree branches for the rabbits to chew, when giving them food place it in different places, don't just put concentrated food in the hutch, it offers no stimulation and no incentive to exercise.

Fresh vegetables, herbs, hay and grass are a good diet for rabbits, along with fruit tree wood or oven baked dry bread to keep their teeth healthy.

Don't just leave food on the floor, tie some of it up just in reach so that they have to put a little more effort in to feeding themselves.

Just like humans, rabbits can get a lot of satisfaction from doing things, rather than having everything given to them where they sit.

Above all, remember that rabbits are intelligent foraging beings that enjoy finding food and discovering new things. The more stimulation you can give your rabbit, the happier they will be.