Name: _____ Date: _____

Why Does My Rabbit Thump?

Reading level 10 (6th grade) · 1068 words

One afternoon, Noor was reading on the back step when Clover, her rabbit, thumped. It was a loud bang from one hind foot, and it made Noor jump. Clover had frozen, with her ears straight up and her eyes fixed on the fence. Noor looked at the fence and saw nothing at all. Why would a rabbit stamp her foot at nothing? Noor went inside to ask her gran, who had kept rabbits for years, and then she went to find out.

Noor learned that a thump can mean several things. A rabbit may be warning other rabbits about danger, or showing fear or frustration, or just feeling unsettled. Gran said you can usually tell which by looking at the rest of the rabbit. Clover's ears were up and she was staring at the fence, which looks like a rabbit on high alert. Noor remembered the neighbor's cat, who liked to sit on top of that fence.

The reason for the thump goes back to what a rabbit is. A rabbit is a prey animal, which means other animals hunt it. Foxes, cats and dogs are all predators. Pet rabbits are related to the wild European rabbit, and the book Noor was reading says their bodies and behavior are very similar to those of their wild cousins. So a pet rabbit is still watching for danger, even in a quiet yard on a sunny afternoon.

Wild rabbits dig. They live in tunnels that connect underground, and one set of tunnels can be home to as many as fifty rabbits. That is why Clover's home is not just a hutch. A hutch on its own is too small for a rabbit, so Noor and Gran gave Clover a big pen that she can hop around in. The pen also has hiding places, because a scared rabbit wants somewhere safe to run to. There should be one for each rabbit, plus a spare.

Noor started to see why Clover's day had a shape. In the wild, rabbits eat grass and other plants, mostly at dawn and dusk. A pet rabbit is busiest in the early morning, the late afternoon and overnight. So Noor feeds Clover her greens at the start and end of the day, when Clover is wide awake and wants to forage. In the middle of the day, Clover usually naps, tucked in her hiding place, while the house is quiet.

Noor drew a circle for her school notebook to show what Clover eats. Most of it, eighty-five percent, was hay and grass. Leafy greens made up a smaller slice, and rabbit pellets were the smallest slice of all. There was no slice for carrots. That surprised Noor, because every cartoon rabbit holds one. Carrots are high in sugar, so they can cause weight gain and stomach trouble. A carrot is a treat, not a meal. Carrot tops are a better choice.

Hay matters for another reason, too. A rabbit's teeth never stop growing. Chewing tough hay wears them down so they stay the right length and shape. A diet that is too soft can lead to dental problems. In the wild, rabbits spend around seventy percent of their time eating grass

and other plants, so Noor puts out a bundle of hay as big as Clover herself every day. A rabbit with no water can become seriously ill, so Noor checks the bowl often.

When Maple arrived, Clover changed. Rabbits are social animals and depend on company for comfort and safety, which is why one rabbit needs another. Gran and Noor had adopted the two from a rescue center, and the pair had already been bonded and neutered. Within a week Noor saw them lying side by side. Later, they groomed each other's faces. Those are signs that rabbits are getting along. Gran says that a grown-up should make the decision about adopting rabbits, and Noor agreed.

Noor began keeping a list of what each sound and move meant. Clover's ears close together and facing up mean she is relaxed. Sometimes she leaps into the air and twists, with all four paws off the ground. This is called a binky, and it means a very happy rabbit. When Clover is content she gently grinds her teeth, with a sound like a cat's purr. Noor found that she could tell Clover's moods from across the yard.

One page of her list was marked with a star. Loud tooth grinding can mean a rabbit is in pain, and that rabbit needs a vet. Rabbits are good at hiding pain, because a weak animal is easy for a predator to spot. So Noor watches for small changes: whether Clover eats her hay, whether her droppings are round, hard and dry, and whether she sits hunched up. If anything seems wrong, Noor tells Gran, and Gran calls the vet. A vet is the one who decides what to do.

Noor had one more rule to learn. A rabbit must never be held on its back. When a rabbit is turned over, it often goes very still, and it can look relaxed. In fact it is a fear response called tonic immobility, which some call playing dead. Studies show the rabbit flattens its ears, widens its eyes and tenses its muscles. Gran showed Noor the safer way: sit low, move slowly, and let the rabbit keep her feet on something steady.

There were other safe habits, too. Noor does not pick Clover up by the ears. She cleans the toilet corner every day. She keeps Clover's house away from drafts, and in hot weather she asks Gran to move it into the shade, since rabbits get very ill in the heat. And she washes her hands with soap after touching Clover or her food or her things. Gran helps the little cousins wash theirs. Noor was never the only person in charge of Clover. Gran is always there to help.

By evening Noor knew what had happened. The neighbor's cat had crept along the top of the fence, and Clover had spotted her first. The thump told Maple to be careful. Then both rabbits bolted into their hiding place, and a little later they came out and began to nibble hay. Noor sat down on the grass, low and quiet, and Clover hopped over to her. Ask a grown-up to look at Peabody Pets with you. You will find it at pet.peabody.kids.

Questions

1. What did Clover's thump most likely mean on the day Noor heard it?

A. She was warning of a possible danger
B. She wanted more food
C. She was happy and playing

2. Why does Noor give Clover a big pen and not only a hutch?

A. Clover likes to dig for gold
B. A hutch alone is too small for a rabbit
C. Gran dislikes hutches

3. Which part of Clover's food is the biggest slice in Noor's circle?

A. Pellets
B. Carrots
C. Hay and grass

4. In this book, what does it mean to forage?

A. To hide in a tunnel
B. To search for food
C. To thump a foot

5. Why does Noor watch for small changes in how Clover acts?

A. Rabbits are good at hiding pain
B. Clover does tricks
C. Rabbits cannot eat hay

6. Why must a rabbit never be held on its back?

A. It makes the rabbit sleepy
B. It triggers a fear freeze
C. It tickles the rabbit

Words to know

prey: hunted animal
predator: hunting animal
forage: search for food
bonded: close friends
immobility: fear freeze
hutch: rabbit house

Answer key: Why Does My Rabbit Thump?

1. A. She was warning of a possible danger
2. B. A hutch alone is too small for a rabbit
3. C. Hay and grass
4. B. To search for food
5. A. Rabbits are good at hiding pain
6. B. It triggers a fear freeze