

Bonding Rabbits

Rabbits are happiest living in pairs. While they love and enjoy human companionship, there are certain social needs that even the most loving owners can never completely fulfil. Rabbits living in bonded pairs are generally healthier than singly kept rabbits: they experience less stress, have stronger immune systems, and have longer life spans on average.

While there are many benefits of living in pairs, bonding two unfamiliar rabbits is a delicate process and can be quite stressful for the person involved. If you can, it is ideal to adopt two already-bonded rabbits, but if you want to bond your current rabbit to a partner, the following information will help guide you through this tricky, but ultimately rewarding, experience.



The Essentials

Spay/Neuter

Rabbits must be altered before attempting to bond them. Unaltered rabbits are territorial and more prone to aggression, both of which can make bonding impossible. You should wait two months after spaying or neutering before attempting to bond to allow the hormones to settle down.

Numbers

A three or more bond is possible but much more difficult. It is usually most successful if you begin with two already-bonded rabbits of the same sex and introduce a third rabbit of the opposite sex. You should go through the same steps as you would with two rabbits, but make sure never to try to bond three single rabbits at the same time. Always work with two rabbits at a time and be prepared for a three-way bond not to work out. Your rabbits might be happier with just their current bond partner.

How to Choose a Partner

Complimentary Personalities

Two dominant rabbits are unlikely to get along and two submissive rabbits may not connect with one another. The best combination is one submissive and one dominant rabbit. Try to determine which best describes your rabbit and look for the opposite quality in potential bonding partners. Dominant rabbits tend to assert themselves more in general and may exhibit behaviour such as grunting or charging when you reach for their food bowl or a favourite toy or treat. Submissive rabbits tend to be more easy-going and laid-back. Keep in mind that behaviour patterns may be entirely different when dealing with other rabbits and interactions with humans only serve as loose guidelines to their personality type.



Girls and Boys

The easiest bond, in general, is one male with one female. However, it is fairly common for the same sex to bond and sex is far less important than personality in selecting a potential bonding partner.

Age and Activity Level

Rabbits of the same approximate age (two adults, two young rabbits, etc.) are more likely to share the same energy level and personality types. Older rabbits tend to be more easy-going and relaxed and younger rabbits are more playful and excitable. However, every rabbit is an individual and you should get to know your rabbit's personality before determining the right kind of match. Size, breed and colouring are unimportant in bonding. What is more important is personality. Even though one rabbit should be dominant and the other submissive, both rabbits should be similar enough to meet one another's needs. A young playful rabbit may prefer another energetic rabbit over a calm, sedate one, and vice versa.

Meet and Greets

Rabbits have distinct personalities and can be choosy with the rabbit they take as a partner. Sometimes shelters will be able to organize bunny meet-and-greets for you, where your rabbit can interact with another rabbit to try to gauge whether there is potential for bonding. Meet-and-greets should always take place in neutral territory, and should begin by having the rabbits interact through the bars of two adjacent cages or pens. Keep about one foot distance between the cages to begin with to prevent any fighting. Initial reactions will help you see whether the bond is likely to form, but regardless of first impressions, it is very important to continue the bonding process slowly, as detailed below.

Keep in mind that these introductions are very contrived and often take place in a stressful environment. They are predominantly to rule out very fearful or aggressive initial reactions, but will not predict behaviour in the home environment or throughout the course of bonding. Bonding is a process, not an event, and slow introductions over time are necessary with even the best-matched pair.

How to Begin the Bonding Process at Home

Neighbours

After adopting a rabbit that would be a suitable bonding partner, you should begin by housing the rabbits in pens next to one another with at least two feet between them to start and then move them closer if going well, in order to prevent fighting through the bars.

Sharing Scents

A good first step to get the rabbits accustomed to one another is to swap their litter boxes and allow them play time in the other's cage (without the other rabbit). This will help the rabbits to get used to the smell of one another even in "their territory." Good signs at this point are interest in one another without grunting or thumping. If you see your rabbit flopping down against the side of its enclosure closest to the other rabbit, this means your rabbit is relaxed and happy. The litterbox swapping stage should be continued for about 2 to 3 weeks before proceeding to meetings.

You can also pet the rabbits in turns, first one, then the other, to get them used to one another's scent and to associate the other rabbit's smell with an enjoyable, relaxing activity like petting, if this is something the rabbit enjoys.



“Dates”

If your rabbits have shown no signs of aggression or fear through their cages, the next step is to let your rabbits meet. This should be done in a neutral territory, such as a pen neither of them has used before or a room neither have been in before. Prepare for the possibility of fighting, which can happen quickly and lead to serious injuries. If you wear oven mitts, then you can easily separate two fighting rabbits without getting bit yourself! Keeping a spray bottle on hand is helpful to distract them.

Take the bonding process slow to help prevent fights. Rabbits often hold grudges and bonding after a fight is much more difficult. Learning to recognize early signs of aggression or fear is essential to fight prevention. These signs can include ears back, tail up, tense muscles and stance, grunting, chasing and biting. Mounting is normal behaviour unless the other rabbit is frightened by this or reacts aggressively. These sessions should initially be only a couple minutes long if everything goes well and they should be separated at any time when they show aggression. You can also help to make this a more positive experience by offering toys, pets and treats to both rabbits.

If the first date goes well, you can repeat the dates each day and increase the time together by a minute or two each session. Continue to closely monitor every session and be prepared to separate them if they become aggressive. If the rabbits are aggressive or fearful in these sessions it is okay to take a step back and repeat the litterbox swapping for another week or so. Every relationship moves at its own pace, so don't be frustrated by having to move back a step or feeling stuck at a certain stage. It's all part of the process!

Driving Them Together

A trick that sometimes helps in getting your buns interested in one another is to take them for a car ride. The theory is that rabbits are frightened by the car ride and will cling to one another in comfort, forging a relationship that will kick start the bonding process. To start, have someone sit in the back with them and have the rabbits in a box or laundry basket, so if fighting starts they can be easily separated. Keep the ride short: no more than 15 minutes at first, to prevent over-stressing them. When you return to your home, remain with the rabbits in the car for a few minutes with the motor off. This will allow them to calm down in one another's presence.

You don't want your rabbits to only associate one another with stressful situations, so after a car ride it is a good idea to also have them together in their neutral space and provide lots of pets, toys and treats to make them happy and relaxed.



Taking it to the Next Level

When your rabbits are successfully enjoying their out time together in neutral territory, you may begin allowing them to share one or both of their enclosures under supervision. To begin, clean the litterboxes and cages to try to make them as neutral smelling as possible. Then, you can either put them both in the same pen, or have them out in the same room with both pens opened to allow them to enter and leave at will. Be on hand to stop any aggression or territoriality. The rabbits should still be apart when you are absent or not actively engaged in supervising them.

Soulmates

When your rabbits are spending all of their time out together and exhibiting bonded behaviour – flopping and sleeping together, sharing a food dish and grooming one another – you can move them in together on a permanent basis. Maintain a watchful eye to help ensure that the bond stays positive. Rabbit bonds are beautiful in their love and devotion, and will surely bring joy to your entire household!

Your Role

Beyond being the ever-present referee, closely watching for signs of aggression and intervening to prevent fights, you should also be the one setting the tone of the interactions. Make sure you are calm and relaxed and show love through petting, cuddling and playing with your rabbits. If one or both of the rabbits already loves and trusts you, you can be an effective tool in showing them how to include the other rabbit in these experiences.

Be patient, flexible, and observant throughout the process. Every rabbit relationship works differently and at its own pace. Find out what seems to work with your rabbits and what doesn't in order to help guide the process.

Additional Information

A great source of information on bonding is The House Rabbit Society (www.rabbit.org). Their website features bonding tips, stories of bonding experiences and journal articles on many aspects of bonding and rabbit care. They also have an email contact specialized in rabbit bonding to give specific advice and answer any questions you might have.

