

Manchester & Salford Branch  
Charity number 232255



# Bonding rabbits



# Introduction

Rabbits are social animals that should live in pairs or groups. However, despite the need for another rabbit's company, two rabbits cannot just be put together and expected to immediately get on. Every rabbit pairing is different; some bondings are fairly easy, taking approximately 4 weeks, while others are more challenging and can take 3-4 months, maybe even longer.

**It is NOT recommended that rabbits are housed with guinea pigs. Rabbits can bully guinea pigs and rabbits can carry *Bordetella bronchiseptica* which can make guinea pigs unwell.**



## Getting Started – essential requirements for a successful 'bond':

- You need to have **plenty of time and patience** and be committed to making it work.
- The best pairing is a **neutered and vaccinated male and female rabbit** (N.B. the rabbits must be at least 4-6 weeks post op neuter).
- You must be able to **provide a 'set up' that allows the rabbits to live safely side-by-side** with one another but not have contact.
- Two weeks is the minimum amount of time they need living next to one another** without contact. This allows the rabbits time to adjust to their environmental changes and accept the presence of one another.
- Neutral territory** for when you are ready to start introductions.

## Choosing a Match

- The best combination is a **male and female pairing**. Although it is possible to have female and female or male and male pairings, you must be prepared for this to either take months, or not succeed at all.
- Size, age and breed is not relevant**, although with a long-haired rabbit it's mate may ingest too much fur when grooming, so just be aware of this possibility and get your slicker brush at the ready!

☑ **Personalities are what count.** Good pairings can be: grumpy and placid, confident and shy, playful and playful. N.B. if your rabbit is an intelligent one; don't try to pair with a very 'simple' one, as they can bully them.

☑ **Be sensitive to how your rabbit might respond to change.** Rabbits are creatures of habit and need plenty of time to get used to changes to their living quarters and that includes the presence of a new rabbit. It is important that you know your rabbit and can recognise signs of unhappiness and contentedness in your rabbit before embarking on this journey.



## Recognising Behavioural Signs

**Aggression:** may appear as: holding ears back at a 45 degree angle, lunging/adopting a lunging position, growling, seeming 'on pins' and charging around, high-raised bobtail and chewing at bars.

**Positive interest:** may appear as: lying along the side of the pen, nicely touching noses or even attempting to groom through bars, and sharing food through the bars.

**Relaxed:** may appear as: washing/grooming themselves (or each other), eating/drinking, laying on their side, stretching out, playing, flopping on their side/rolling on their back, resting quietly.

**Indifferent:** may appear as: ignoring the other rabbit, playing away from other rabbit.



## Stage One – Living Side By Side

1. The **most important ingredient in rabbit bonding is time**. Therefore it is essential that you allow the rabbits to get to know each other slowly and safely and do not rush the process.
2. You can do this by **allowing them to live safely next to one another** either by placing a divider in the room or having two good sized cages side-by-side and allowing them to alternate their play time.

*By doing this they are getting used to each other's presence (as well as changes to their living space). Initially you may see aggressive behaviour from one or both rabbits, but this is normal and in most cases this will settle down to an indifference or positive interest within a week.*

3. If, after a week, the rabbits are either ignoring each other or positively paying attention to one another then you can **begin to swap soiled hay**. As the rabbits get used to the immediacy of the other rabbit's scent in their quarters then you can gradually build up to swapping litter trays or even accommodation - but take your time in doing this and go at the rabbit's pace, not yours.



## Troubleshooting

**If aggressive behaviour is evident after two weeks of living side by side** – either give the rabbits more time living opposite each other and reassess behaviour changes weekly, or try moving them both to an entirely different living area and begin Stage One all over again. If neither of these options is possible then consider ending the attempt now.



## Stage Two – Introductions in a Neutral Territory

If after two weeks of getting to know one another the rabbits are indifferent to, or relaxed around, one another, then you can start introductions. You must **not** move on to introductions if one or both are still showing signs of aggression (see *Troubleshooting section*).

1. **Neutral territory must be used** for 'bonding' sessions. Good places are a hallway, bathroom or kitchen.
2. Opinion is divided as to whether to fill the space you choose with enriching distractions such as tunnels, boxes and hidey holes, but we suggest in the **early stages keeping the space clear** as it will make it easier for you to swiftly respond to scuffles.
3. Introductions in the early days should only last as long as they can tolerate each other and this may only be a for a few seconds or minutes at a time. **Only try one session a day** to allow each rabbit to calm down and feel secure in their usual living space.
4. **Sit in the bonding space whilst the rabbits explore** the environment and each other. Do not worry if they seem to have their 'heckles up', it is common to see signs of aggression from one or both rabbits towards each other when they first meet.
5. **Lunging, growling and 'boxing' are quite commonly observed behaviours** in early introductory sessions and do not require intervention. What you need to avoid is any of these behaviours escalating to fighting and so be prepared to swiftly respond to separating/picking up one of the rabbits.
6. **Commonly when you intervene in a 'set-to' one or both rabbit will redirect their aggression toward you.** For this reason you need to make sure that your arms, legs and feet are covered. You may also want to wear a pair of thick gloves if you feel that one or both rabbits will be particularly aggressive.
7. **Mounting one another is a behaviour that is a commonly seen in newly establishing pairs.** The behaviour appears to be related to sorting out who is the dominant and submissive one of the pair and not to do with copulation. Mounting on the rear is acceptable, but mounting the face requires immediate intervention to avoid injury to the genital area. As you lift off a rabbit you will often find they have a tight grip on their partner's fur with their teeth, don't worry, they will let go.
8. The **early introductions can take a while to develop beyond just a few minutes of tolerance** and is usually achieved with a series of gradual breakthroughs. If you are managing a few minutes of tolerance with one another then you can try introducing food to promote greater tolerance toward one another by encouraging eating together.



*Don't despair; these things really do take time. Initially if the rabbits show signs of aggression and attempt to fight then after time appear indifferent to each other, progress has been made. After that rabbits usually become curious about each other, approach each other and sniff. One may lower its head, requesting licks. Once the start of grooming is seen this is an excellent sign and trust between the two rabbits is developing. Once signs of grooming and cuddling up together are seen the time spent together can be increased.*



## **Troubleshooting**

As well as feeding rabbits together you can also place them side by side and stroke them simultaneously. The act of receiving a pleasurable experience in such close proximity to one another should offer some reassurance and help to breakdown suspicion of one another.

If you are seeing persistent assertive behaviour from one rabbit to the other, which continues once the other has accepted and taken up the submissive role, you can try the following technique:

Place your hand on the top of your rabbit's head and gently press to the floor and hold for a few seconds. In doing this you are imposing an alternative hierarchy and delaying the 'battle' between the rabbits until such time they have learnt to accept one another and live in harmony. You must not hold the rabbit in position for more than a few seconds; typically the rabbit will relax and submits very quickly. N.B. This technique is only effective if it immediately follows the assertive behaviour, otherwise the rabbit will fail to make the connection between the two acts.



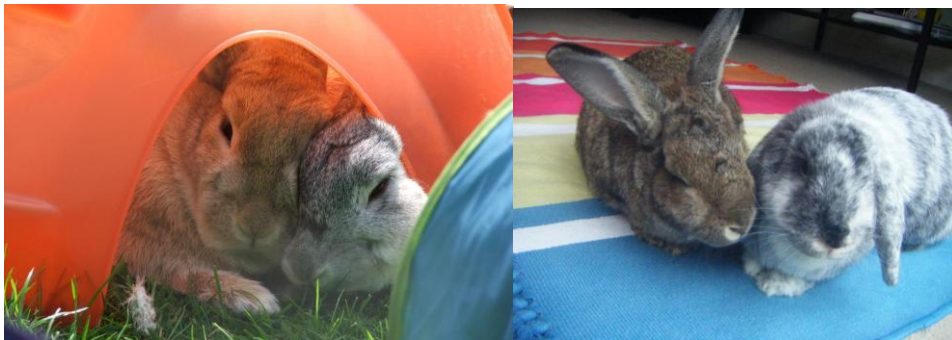
## **Stage Three - Increasing Time Together**

1. Once the rabbits are comfortable together the **next stage is to increase the play area size** (still in neutral territory). At this point we would suggest enriching the environment with boxes, tunnels, toys etc.

2. It is now all about **gradually increasing the length of time they spend together**. Allow 'spats' and mounting to happen so they can establish themselves as a couple, but do act swiftly to avoid fights developing.

*Judging how long to allow 'spats' to continue is difficult so try distracting them rather than physically intervening. For example, clapping hands or making a loud banging noise is a common distraction method or you can even try offering strokes to calm them down. Others use water pistols but we consider this to be a punitive technique that should be avoided at all times.*

3. **Make sure you are holding sessions daily**, preferably at the same time and to include routine feeding to maximise the regularity of the sessions for the rabbits; after all they are true creatures of habit so you need to establish this as a routine.
4. **After several successful plays the rabbits can be placed into their intended living space**, albeit initially under supervision.



## **Troubleshooting**

If the rabbits can spend quite some time with one another but can't seem to make the final leap to full-time living, then there are things you can do to reduce their suspicion and reactivity to one another. For example:

- ★ Put them in a pet carrier together and go for a walk (around the house, to the shops etc).
- ★ Place them in an empty bath where they will slip and slide.
- ★ Go for a drive with them on the back seat with someone supervising them.

The aim of each of these scenarios is to simulate a mildly stressful situation, so that the situation becomes more important than who they are with, and therefore helps them to overcome their suspicions and 'pull together' in the adverse circumstances.



## Stage Four – Leaving Them Alone

The scariest bit is always leaving the rabbits alone for the first time overnight. Some people choose to sleep in their rabbits' living quarters to be on hand, others leave them to it. Here are some good indicators that they are ready to live together:

- They can spend several hours together without any eruptions.
- They are lying/sitting side-by-side.
- They are grooming each other.
- They are actively seeking each other out for positive interaction.
- They eat/drink, groom themselves and relax around each other.
- You've reached the point where separating them might prove detrimental to the progress achieved. (Unfortunately this is a decision you can only base on instinct.)

Whatever happens, don't worry if you find fur lying around the following day. Check each rabbit over for injuries and if they seem settled with one another do not separate. It is inevitable they will have the odd 'scrap' as they get to know one another and establish their position; you just need to satisfy yourself that harmony is prevailing between them.

## Beyond the Bonding Stages

It is not uncommon for rabbits to fall out with one another, even months/years down the line. If you haven't witnessed the fall-out, typical signs that this has happened are avoidance, renewed aggression and/or loose fur lying around. If aggression prevails you may need to separate the rabbits and restart the bonding process all over again. However, if they seem reasonably at ease with one another then you can usually leave them together and opt for monitoring them until they have settled back into their pairing.

More often than not you are better off leaving the rabbits to it than separating them because 'spats' are a common occurrence and they need the opportunity to work things out between them so long as it is safe to do so.

### Tips to avoid a fall out:

- **Plenty of space and environmental enrichment is paramount** to keeping them happy. By offering them a varied and interesting environment you are helping to keep them occupied and reducing the likelihood of them 'turning' on one another.



- If one rabbit is more possessive over food than the other then make sure they get fed first and/or separately.
- **Maintain routines** and try to avoid changing the layout of their environment. If you need to dispose of well used items, such as cardboard boxes, make sure you have replacements ready so that you can make an immediate exchange.
- **Take them everywhere together** because separation, however temporary, can lead to a breakdown in their bond. This is especially important when going to the vets, as many rabbit bonds become disrupted due to the change of smell their mate comes back with. If the rabbits need to stay in for the day or overnight it is even more important that they stay together.
- During the early weeks of living together full-time **avoid placing them in close proximity to other rabbits**, as this threatens their sense of security with one another and their environment.
- Remember that some established pairs will be settled and content without any problems in the future. Others will have spats and fall outs from time to time (particularly during Spring time). However, don't worry they will remain bonded just monitor them following the tips above and try not to separate unless fighting is constant.



## Remember:

- ☒ **Don't Speed date** – the act of forcing two rabbits together under any circumstance is counterproductive and will only cause them unnecessary distress.
- ☒ **Don't rush the rabbits** – this is a sure fire way to failure. Let them take as long as they need to get used each other safely. The two week rule is tried and tested by staff with two decades worth of experience at bonding rabbits.
- ☒ **Don't try more than one session a day** – rabbits need 24 hours between each early bonding session to improve their chances of being more receptive and tolerant at the next attempt.
- ☒ **Don't separate them** - once the bond is established always take them together wherever they need to go.