

RABBIT BONDING

Rabbits are highly social and require companions of the same species. Studies have shown that rabbits value companionship as highly as food and those housed with suitable companions engage in less destructive behaviours such as digging, bar biting, and chewing. Unfortunately, rabbits are also territorial and the incorrect introduction of a new rabbit into an existing rabbit's environment can result in aggression. This handout is a summary of elements that need to be considered when bonding rabbits and provides other resources to help you with the bonding process.

There are always exceptions to the rules, but the following points should be considered to increase chances of successful bonding.

THE RABBITS

- **Never try and bond an unwell rabbit.** Have both rabbits health checked and fully vaccinated and neutered prior to bonding – unwell rabbits will be defensive and less likely to accept a companion.
- **Male and female neutered pairs are more likely to be successful.** Two females or two males (especially siblings) can be bonded before sexual maturity (4 months) although they may have increased fighting during spring and summer each year as their hormone levels increase – even after neutering. Male and female neutered pairs are best.
- **Avoid groups.** Bonding more than two rabbits is much more difficult than a pair. A family of rabbits (e.g. mum, dad and offspring) may co-habitate if there is enough space however, unrelated rabbits are likely to be in constant conflict. Most people lack the space for any more than one pair and fighting is much more likely in small territories. An unrelated group of rabbits will be in constant competition for resources such as space, food, water etc and the chronic stress due to bonding trios of unrelated rabbits can lead to chronic poor health and the development of various diseases as well as one rabbit at risk of constant injury from more dominant members of the group.
- **Age and physical characteristics of the rabbits are less important.**



THE SPACE

- **Bond in neutral territory.** Because rabbits will defend their territory. Do not try and bond rabbits in a space where an existing rabbit has been – you need **neutral territory** otherwise aggression is more likely.
- **Bond in an appropriately sized safe space.** Do not place unbonded rabbits in small spaces – this will increase conflict. When bonding in neutral territory, have them in a large space such as a room or garage. Do not force them to come face to face by putting them in a barren small area and NEVER bond in a bath – this risks injury to both rabbits as slipping on such surfaces can cause spinal fractures. Similarly, avoid too large an area e.g. a large back yard as the two rabbits may form separate territories within that space.
- **Reduce confrontation.** Provide multiple tunnels, hides (these have to have two openings otherwise the rabbit will feel trapped) and platforms to jump on top of so they can get away from one another.
- **Provide distractions.** Set up multiple food and water stations to reduce competition for resources but provide food and toys to give the rabbits something to do in the shared space.
- **Consider further barriers.**
Aggression at first meeting is unusual but if you are concerned, consider having the rabbits meet through a fence for the first few meetings by having a divider through the centre of the neutral territory – remember not to have the rabbit in its own enclosure as they will want to defend their territory.



THE SUPERVISOR

- **Do your homework.** Learn as much as you can about rabbit body language and the correct bonding process from reputable sources such as The Rabbit Welfare Fund and Association or The House Rabbit Society (see later) prior to getting a companion.
- **Consider professional help.** Ideally, rescue a companion from a reputable rescue centre and they will do the bonding for you. This is useful for those who lack neutral territory in which to bond and can allow your rabbit to choose their own companion!
- **Be Prepared.** It is unusual for rabbits to be aggressive on first meeting but it is important they can get away from one another and that you are prepared to intervene – wear gardening gloves to protect yourself from bites, have a thick towel and if aggression is noted then carefully but swiftly separate the rabbits.

WHAT TO EXPECT

- **Acceptable behaviour** – circling and humping are acceptable behaviour and this can be monitored. Rapid, extended circling may require a brief intervention to move one rabbit a short distance away to reduce conflict
- **Immediate aggression** does not mean you can't persist, but for the safety of both rabbits have a fence between them and expect bonding to take longer. Start with short sessions once or twice daily of around 10 minutes and end on a positive note when the rabbits are relaxed not after conflict. Seek help if you are inexperienced.
- **Bonding can take time.** Some rabbits will immediately get on well, others may take short bonding sessions over a few weeks. Don't rush things and try and intervene before things escalate otherwise it is hard for the rabbits to build trust.

Resources

Rabbit Welfare Fund and Association

<https://rabbitwelfare.co.uk/rabbit-care-advice/ownership/bonding-rabbits/>

RSPCA Rabbit bonding

<https://www.rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/pets/rabbits/company/bonding>

PDSA Rabbit Bonding

<https://www.pdsa.org.uk/taking-care-of-your-pet/looking-after-your-pet/rabbits/how-to-help-your-bunnies-bond>

House Rabbit Society

<https://rabbit.org/>

