

# Bonding Rabbits

## Rabbit pairings

Rabbits can live happily in male/female, female/female, male/male pairings and larger mixed groups. However, the most natural and therefore easiest pairing is male/female. In the wild, rabbits tend to live in male/female pairs and will sometimes remain partnered for life. Females (does) are by nature the homemakers, creating the nesting burrow while the male defends against other bucks invading.

If you are starting off with two rabbits, many rescue centres have already undertaken the bonding process and will be able to provide you with a pair who are already good friends. It is much more difficult to buy two young rabbits from a petshop or breeder as the best pairing is male/female but this has obvious problems until the rabbits are neutered/spayed and you will need to keep the rabbits separate until this has been done.

If buying two females or two males from a single litter, they will generally remain friends as long as neutering/spaying is undertaken as soon as possible. Once the rabbits reach sexual maturity, the males will often start to fight and sometimes the relationship is broken for ever. Females are less likely to fight but can still become territorial and aggressive with each other.

## Bonding or introducing rabbits

The process of introducing two rabbits is known as bonding. As every rabbit is different and has its own personality, you cannot guarantee that two rabbits will bond. However, rabbits are gregarious and therefore predisposed to living together so the chances are good that the rabbits will get along.

The key things are as follows:-

1. The best pairing is male / female
2. Both rabbits must be neutered / spayed
3. Introductions must be taken slowly

It is much easier to introduce a female into a male's living space than vice versa. Females are by nature much more territorial and will therefore defend against a newcomer more vigorously.

## Preparation

Start off by putting the two rabbits in adjoining cages. If you already have a house rabbit and are introducing another, let your current rabbit run free (provide it with another litter tray) and put the new rabbit in the cage with your current rabbit's litter tray, bowl etc. The rabbits will get used to each other's smell and your current rabbit will learn that he/she cannot be territorial about the cage when both rabbits are eventually free together.

If you don't have a cage for your house rabbit, put the two rabbits in adjoining rooms with a baby gate or similar barrier between them. It is important that they are able to see and smell each other.

If you have a hutch rabbit, you will need to borrow another hutch or a while and place the two hutches facing each other. Bear in mind that two rabbits need double the living space so you might need to invest in a new hutch anyway.

Give them a few days to settle down. The rabbits will be very curious about each other, touching noses through the bars and probably displaying some courtship behaviour such as honking and circling even though both are neutered / spayed. It helps to have a good understanding of rabbit body language. A good sign will be when both rabbits lie down either side of the bars as this shows they are relaxed together. It helps to feed them both together at the barrier so they get used to eating together.

If either rabbit has been recently neutered or spayed, you will need to wait 4 to 6 weeks for the hormones to reduce fully before attempting a face to face meeting. For two de-sexed rabbits, it can take anything from a couple of days to a few weeks - it all depends on the rabbits' personalities. If either rabbit is displaying aggressive behaviour such as growling and biting, wait a while longer before trying the introduction.

### **Meeting face to face**

When they are ready, prepare a neutral space for the introduction i.e. somewhere that neither rabbit feels is "their" place. A bathroom is a good choice as your current rabbit is unlikely to be territorial about it. Remove anything that might hurt the rabbits if they run into it or jump on it but it is a good idea to provide a cardboard box with a hole in either end that a stressed rabbit can retreat into or jump on top of.

Put both rabbits in the room, crouch down at their level and remain there with them. The three most common scenarios are as follows:-

1. One or both rabbits immediately attack the other. This is very rare but is unmistakable when it happens. For this reason it is advisable to wear thick gloves for the first meeting as you will need to intervene quickly to prevent the rabbits getting hurt. If this happens, separate the rabbits immediately and go back to stage 1 i.e. separate quarters.
2. In the most common scenario, one of the rabbits will take the lead and approach the other, sniffing and circling them and trying to mount them. This is not so much for courtship as for dominance and is the rabbits way of figuring out who is going to be "boss". A submissive rabbit will let this happen, putting their head on the ground, while a less submissive rabbit may nip or run away. Stay with the rabbits at all times and intervene if you feel one or both rabbits are becoming too stressed.
3. Love at first sight i.e. the rabbits approach each other as equals, sniffing and nuzzling each other but both are clearly enjoying the experience. This is rare so don't worry if it doesn't happen.

Assuming your rabbits follow the most likely scenario at point 2, allow them 10 minutes or so for the first meeting and watch closely for any serious aggression. Nipping and fur pulling is quite common and is not necessarily cause to separate them. You can help by sitting down with the rabbits, stroking them and generally acting as a "chaperone" as they get to know each other. It also helps to have a water spray handy; spraying water in the face of an attacking or over-exuberant rabbit usually stops it in its tracks and furthermore encourages grooming, a social activity which fosters rabbit relationships.

Continue with daily meetings, increasing from 10 mins to 30 or 40 mins at a time. All being well, the rabbits will eventually stop taking notice of each other and become curious about their surroundings instead. This is the turning point when it is usually safe to let the rabbits roam free together in the house, however, continue to separate them when you are not there to supervise. When the rabbits start to lie down together or groom each other, the bond is made and will continue to deepen with time. It is now safe to leave the rabbits together at all times.

### **Bonding problems and tips**

Most problems arise because the rabbits are not de-sexed or the introductory period of separate housing has not been for long enough. Rabbits that are introduced prematurely may have a fight and take a long time to recover from the trauma of it.

To help more difficult pairings or speed up the bonding process in general, you can try putting the rabbits into a situation which is stressful for them, such as a car ride - in theory the rabbits should turn to each other for comfort. You can also mimic bonded rabbit behaviour, such as grooming, by stroking one or both rabbits as they sit together as this should encourage them to lick each other.

In summary, slow and steady wins the race. Remain relaxed and calm or the rabbits will pick up on your nerves. Bonding rabbits is probably more stressful on us as observers as it is on the rabbits; ultimately they need to work it out in their own way - our role is to watch, encourage and make sure they stay safe.