

Bonding In Rabbits

Why pair rabbits up?

Rabbits are a social species. They are also a prey species and rely on other members of the group to alert them to danger. They also rely on others for creation and maintenance of their burrows and home environment. The natural basic group is one male and one female.



But we have domesticated rabbits now – does this still apply?

YES! Research shows that rabbits value companionship as highly as they value food and access to more living space.

Rabbits in a compatible pairing are less stressed and show a decrease in abnormal behaviours such as fur-pulling or bar-biting.

BUT...Compatibility is crucial

Both rabbits must be relaxed and happy in the relationship for it to be welfare positive (just like people!). Bonding can take time. It requires good observational skills from the owner, calmness and understanding that you might not find the perfect partner for your rabbit the first time.

When is bonding required?

Ideally new rabbit owners would acquire two bonded rabbits at the same time. If buying from a pet shop it's ok to select the first rabbit yourself, but the second should be the first rabbit's choice – the one it is bonded to.

BUT

Sometimes it doesn't work that way, and bonding can be required for many reasons such as:

- The death of a rabbit
- If the bond breaks down after separation (i.e. being hospitalised at the vets)
- If the bond breaks down for another reason such as change in environment, diet etc.
- If the original pairing doesn't work out and new partners are sought for the rabbits.

Prepare for success

The most likely pairing to work is a neutered male and a neutered female. Same sex pairings can work but are less likely to be successful. Again the best chance for success is if both rabbits are neutered.

Ideally they should be a similar age and have similar physical abilities (i.e. an elderly arthritic rabbit may find living with a very young, active rabbit quite stressful). They should be a similar size. Ideally the rabbits should be already neutered, so that they don't have to be separated again when this takes place. They should both be in good health as far as possible. They should both be vaccinated, and should both be wormed, especially if they have come from different environments or their history is unknown.

Should I rescue or buy?

Often when choosing a partner for your rabbit it is best to visit a rescue centre. They tend to have a range of sizes and ages of rabbits, and different personality types too. Often they will recommend that you bring your rabbit along and they will help you select a suitable potential mate. Most rescue centres will understand that a pairing may not work and will happily take the rabbit back and help you to try again if required.

The environment

They should have a large space with at least two shelters (one per animal), pipes, boxes, toys, foraging to enrich their environment. The RWAFF recommend that for 2 rabbits the minimum space should be 10ft by 6ft, with a 3ft headroom.

Types of Bonding

Fear facilitated bonding – you may well have heard of this method. It involves outing the rabbits in a situation where they are so scared, that the only ‘safe’ thing is the other rabbit. You may have heard people advise you to put rabbits in the bath, put them in a cat carrier together and drive them around in the car together etc. We **DO NOT** recommend this method and here is why:

- Purposely inducing fear is cruel (it is also illegal as it is breaking the Animal Welfare Act)
- It tends to produce temporary bonds
- It can give a false idea that the rabbits are going to get on. Often when they are then given enough space they fight.



It is similar to people – you might cling to someone that you happened to be trapped in a burning building with, but this may well not be the person that you would choose as your best friend.

Welfare orientated bonding – this is the **preferred** method of bonding, it is not forced and involves much less (if any) distress.

This method provides time for rabbits to develop a relationship that will be long lasting.

There are two methods – **split mixing**, and **neutral territory mixing**, explained below.

Split Mixing

This is where rabbits can see and smell each other, but cannot harm each other through the barrier between them. You need plenty of time to be able to observe the rabbits, and to be aware of signs of stress, relaxation and aggression in the rabbit.

You should consider split mixing if:

- The history of either rabbit is not known
- If one is waiting to be neutered, or they aren't ready to be put together permanently yet
- If the bond is expected to be tricky

- If one is returning from a period away e.g. in hospital.

Rabbits live side by side in new (neutral) spaces. Each rabbit needs a minimum space of 2 metres by 2 metres. Scents should be swapped – switch litter trays daily, switch bedding between enclosures daily, and wipe a clean cloth over each rabbit, and then over the other rabbit. The idea is that both rabbits end up with the same scent profile. You can also use Pet Remedy in the area – this is a calming product that you can buy as a spray or as a plug-in diffuser.

Observe the rabbits frequently – look for signs of aggression and stress (described later). If after a few days the signs of aggression and stress do not disappear, then try a different pairing. If all seems to be relaxed then move to neutral territory pairing.



An example of split mixing – each rabbit has its own space but is able to see and smell the other.

Neutral Territory Mixing

Use this method if:

- The history of both rabbits is known
- OR, they have already had a successful introduction at the rescue centre and are coming back to their permanent home (this home environment must be neutral to both rabbits).
- OR, they have already had a successful bonding for at least a week at the rescue centre and are coming back to their permanent home (the home must have been made as neutral as possible – new bedding, new furniture), or a new additional space.

The neutral territory should be somewhere that NEITHER rabbit has been before. It must be large so that the rabbits have space to get away from each other if they want to – ideally at least 2x2 metres. It should be complex, there should be several piles of forage, digging pits, toys etc. It must have several hiding places. Hiding places must have TWO entrances/exits to avoid trapping so no hutches or carriers. There should be two sources of water and two sources of low value food (such as hay/forage). It can be a temporary area or part of their eventual permanent home.

NB – make sure floors are not slippery as this can be very stressful for rabbits.



An example of neutral territory bonding - rabbits have been placed in a large neutral territory with two options of shelters.

- This method is more natural and less stressful for rabbits – but it still comes with risks. Make sure that you observe bunnies carefully and check them both over for wounds daily.
- The territory must be easy for you to access in case you need to intervene to break up any fights. Wear suitable clothing in case you do need to intervene, remember that rabbits can bite and scratch when stressed. Have a towel ready to help you pick rabbits up if needed.
- Avoid putting 'high value' food in the enclosure to start with in case bunnies fight over this. Examples might include pellets, treats or greens. Make sure they have plenty of hay and/or grass at all times.

READY, SET, GO!

All pairings are different – some are love at first sight, some take longer.

Start as early in the day as possible so that you can monitor the rabbits for as long as possible.

Watch them continuously for at least an hour to begin with, then every 15 minutes.

Health check them at the end of the day to make sure that both rabbits are ok.

To leave them together overnight or not?! It depends....

Signs that rabbits are NOT getting on:

- Charging at each other with ears flat, and biting
- Biting which results in a lot of fur being loosened, or latching on to each other
- Kicking each other – particularly in the stomach area
- Actively pursuing the other rabbit

SEPARATE IMMEDIATELY if any of these signs are seen and go back to the split mixing stage.

Acceptable behaviour includes:

- Minor chasing and nipping, some fur pulling which all subsides quickly

- Mounting
- Grooming themselves or each other
- Eating
- Ignoring each other
- **Do not intervene unless needed as it may prolong the process**

General pattern of a successful mix:

- Day one – acceptable behaviour. Rabbits may sit calmly on their own grooming and feeding for most of the day. Leave overnight together. May decide to use pet remedy also.
- Day two – rabbits may sit closer together, they may groom each other occasionally, mounting still common at this point.
- Day three and onwards – as above but likely to spend more time together.

General points:

- If the introduction goes well but unacceptable behaviours occur at around days 3-6, it is likely that they will not settle. You can try going back to the split mixing stage for a week or so to start the process again but it is likely that they may not get on in the future. This is because they learn to fear an attack in the presence of the other bunny. Especially if they have fought very aggressively or frequently, the prognosis for these animals re-bonding is not good.
- Bonds can break down at any age and stage, sometimes even after months or years. There is always a reason for this. Always be vigilant and remember to seek advice to understand why the bond may have broken down, at what steps to take to attempt re-bonding.
- Reasons for bonds breaking down include: maturation and the onset of spring, onset of illness or pain in one of the animals, changes in the group like the introduction or loss of another animal, changes in other groups kept nearby, changes in physical environment, changes in management routine.
- Get to know your animal's normal behavior, and seek help when you notice the FIRST signs of changes in behavior such as the rabbits being more separate than usual, chasing each other, fur in the enclosure, one of the rabbits hiding more. If this happens then split the rabbits up but keep them within sight and smell of each other. SEEK ADVICE as soon as possible. Deterioration in the bond can occur rapidly and the sooner you seek advice the better the chance of being able to keep the rabbits together long term.

Sources of advice for behavior problems in rabbits:

- RWAFF (Rabbit Welfare Association and Fund) have a helpline that you can call – the number is 0844 3246090 Monday to Friday 11am to 3pm.
- RWAFF website has some useful resources also:
<http://rabbitwelfare.co.uk/rabbit-care-advice/bonding-rabbits/>
- ABTC register of clinical animal behaviourists website:
<http://abtcouncil.org.uk/clinical-animal-behaviourists.html>

- Remember it's also important to rule out any pain or disease so having your rabbit checked by a vet is always a good idea if you've got any concerns.