

Rabbit Friendships: Would your rabbit benefit from having a buddy?



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Rabbits are social creatures, and may become bored if left alone all day. Many rabbits benefit from having another rabbit as a companion, but choosing a companion for a rabbit isn't always easy. The key to a good match is personality and compatibility. Two dominant, territorial rabbits are more difficult to bond than one dominant and one submissive rabbit. Personality cannot be determined by size or breed, therefore the bonding process will not be affected by the size and breed of the rabbits.

Generally, the easiest bond is between a spayed female and a neutered male. Babies often bond easily with one another and to some adults, but the bond may be broken at the onset of puberty. Male-male and female-female bonds may also work, but these pairs may require more effort and persistence.

Spaying and neutering, which helps to alleviate hormonal tendencies and territorial behaviour, is important for bonding even same sex pairs. At the very least, one rabbit **MUST** be altered when bonding male-female pairs to avoid accidental pregnancy. (Note: Adult rabbits are fertile at all times, mate quickly, and can conceive at a very young age. Don't take this chance!).

THE TECHNIQUE

Always quarantine any new rabbit for two weeks. It is also a good idea to have the new rabbit checked by a veterinarian before introducing him to your rabbit. After the quarantine, move the new rabbit's cage into the room with the existing rabbit. Place their cages side by side to allow the rabbits to get used to each other's scent. They should be able to smell and see each other, but should not be able to touch each other. You can allow separate exercise time in the same area, but always ensure that the rabbits cannot bite one another through the cage bars.

Bonding sessions must take place in a small neutral area, i.e., an area that is not frequented

by either rabbit. Make sure that there are no places that either rabbit can crawl into, such as an open cage or box. You do not want either rabbit to feel cornered, or for a fight to break out in an area that you cannot readily get to. Two rabbits may get along fabulously in familiar territory when one rabbit is caged and the other is not; however, they may behave aggressively when they are both out of their cages. Always supervise each bonding session and do not leave the rabbits unattended.

At first, bonding sessions should be short. As the rabbits start to become friends, the sessions can be longer. The bonding sessions need to be a pleasant experience for your rabbits. Provide them with new toys, litterboxes filled with fresh hay, or a platter of veggies to share. Try to end the sessions on a positive note and work with your rabbits every day. Some rabbits bond very quickly, while others may take several months to bond.

TIPS

1. Prepare for marking of territory with feces and urine. After the rabbits get used to each other, the marking will gradually subside. Even spayed and neutered rabbits may mark territory in the presence of a new rabbit.
2. For tough bonds, it may be helpful to take both rabbits for a car ride before the bonding session. If there is any danger of the rabbits fighting in the car, put them in separate carriers. If you put them in the same carrier, have a friend drive while you supervise the rabbits.
3. If you are planning to house the rabbits together in one of the existing cages after they are bonded, start by switching cages each day to avoid 'ownership' of one cage.
4. Learning to recognize aggressive body language (e.g., tail erect, ears back, tense body posture) is helpful in preventing fights. Rabbits who fight will sometimes hold grudges, making the bonding process harder.

ASSESSING PROGRESS

If, during the bonding sessions, the rabbits ignore one another and go about their business of eating, grooming themselves or relaxing, the session is going well. In time, the rabbits will bond. However, if the rabbits are continually aggressive towards one another, it may be best to allow them to continue to live separately.

In order to assess progress, it is important to be able to understand your rabbit's body language. For example, to a rabbit, nipping and fighting are mean very different things, even though they may look the same to us. Fighting is a deliberate attack. Nipping is a means of communicating.

Circling and chasing are common occurrences during bonding and can escalate into a fight. Stop circling and chasing when it occurs, but do not separate the rabbits. Instead, place them side by side while petting them or feeding them treats. After they have calmed down, you can let them run around again.

Mounting is a natural part of the bonding process. It is not necessary to stop mounting as long as the rabbit being mounted does not become aggressive or afraid. However, never allow backwards mounting because the rabbit on top can be seriously injured with one bite. Mounting can be amorous, as well as a way to establish dominance.

After your rabbits are getting along well in neutral territory, you can expand the area to gradually include territory familiar to both rabbits. Cage them separately until they are getting along well in territory that is not neutral. Start to cage them together for short periods while you are there to supervise. You do not want a fight to break out in the cage when you are not there to intervene.

IN CASE OF A FIGHT

When fights occur during a bonding session, our first instinct is to try to pick up one of the rabbits; however, this can lead to serious bite wounds. Do not use your bare hands to break up a scuffle. Instead, spray the fighting pair with a water bottle set on the 'stream setting' or cover them with a blanket. To prevent a fight, it is helpful to have a broom or sturdy piece of cardboard handy to slip between two angry rabbits. However, be

careful not to poke either rabbit in the eye with the broom, because this can cause injury to the eye. It is also helpful to wear oven mitts on your hands during a bonding session, in case you have to break up a fight.

Have these 'tools of the trade' on hand at the start of every bonding session so you don't have to leave the room for supplies, leaving the rabbits unattended. Serious fights can break out in seconds: pay attention to the rabbits' body language at all times. If fighting or nipping has taken place, always check your rabbits thoroughly for wounds. Disinfect any cuts or scratches and consult a veterinarian when necessary. A seemingly minor scratch can quickly become an abscess that requires medical attention.

A FINAL WORD

Always remember: Never adopt a rabbit as a companion for your current rabbit if you cannot accept the fact that they may never bond. Instead, consider fostering a rabbit in need of a permanent home. If your current rabbit bonds with your foster rabbit, then you can adopt him.

There are definite advantages to having bonded pairs. Rabbits who have bonded friends tend to be less bored – and therefore, less destructive – than single rabbits. They have company when you are working late, and it is easier to clean one rabbit cage than two. Sometimes, however, it is just not meant to be. And rabbits should never be over-stressed in the process of making them become friends. We have to remember to do what is right for our rabbits – and not what is most convenient for us.

