

Blissful Bonded Bunnies....or Not

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. It is important to choose a rabbit with a personality that is compatible with your rabbit's personality. Two dominant, territorial rabbits are more difficult to bond than one dominant and one submissive rabbit. The size and breeds of the rabbits have no effect on the bonding process.

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 patience. 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 vet before introducing him to your existing 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 not able to touch. You can allow separate exercise time in the same area, but make sure 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 can 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, your sessions can be longer. The bonding sessions need to be a pleasant experience for your rabbits. Provide the rabbits with new toys, litter boxes 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.

Tips

- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- Learning to recognize aggressive body language (e.g., tail erect, ears back, tense body posture) is helpful in preventing fights before they happen. 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 both or one of the rabbits are continually aggressive towards the other, 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 very different, 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 that both have frequented. 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, dump a bowl of water onto the fighting pair

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or cover them with a blanket. To prevent another fight, it is helpful to have a broom or a piece of sturdy cardboard handy to slip between two angry rabbits. It is also helpful to wear oven mitts on your hands during a bonding session, in case you have to break up a fight. A water bottle set on the 'stream' setting may also deter aggressive behaviour.

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 and risk 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. This topic is discussed further in the "Wound Management" article on page 4.

We asked some members to write about their experiences with bonding bunnies. Some were successful, and some not so successful.

Love at first sight - Sherry/Gina Rohekar: Major Tom was an "only child" for about 6 months when we noticed he just wasn't as playful or perky as he used to be. On a trip to the mall we



fell in love with a grey Mini-Rex, we hoped Tommy would too.

We took the two buns into a neutral room for their first date. Both of them were more interested in exploring the room than each other! So we took them out into the main room of the apartment and crossed our fingers. Well, they fell in love at first sight. They instantly were grooming each other and flopping next to each other. No marking of territory, no fighting - none of the things we were worried might happen. We even let them share a cage (we connected the two cages) after only a couple of weeks - they

were dying to be together 24/7, and we were convinced by the through-the-bars kissies they kept trying to give each other.

Two girls - by Louise Harrison: When I first saw "The Girls" they were around 6-7 weeks old and I was praying they were both the same sex. The vet was pretty sure they were both female, but their hormones were raging and the dominance war continued. It was making



me very nervous. Poor Daisy had her head jumped on and butt bit so many times! The little Netherland Dwarf, Binky, was tormenting my big, goofy Mini-Rex - so separate cages and a little bit of peace and quiet were in order.

They went in for their spay at 6 months. I kept them in separate cages for a couple of days after the spay and they've been best buddies ever since. Once in while one will jump on the other or chase, but I think they're just trying to break up the monotony of their day. There has never been an injury - the occasional little tuft of fur but nothing else. When I come home from work they're cuddled up on the same dining room chair either snoozing or grooming each other. It always amuses me that they share everything - even the same small precious piece of carrot - without fighting over it.

Two boys - Kelly Turner: When I got Casper I was under the assumption that Bubbles was a girl. However, when I took



Bubbles into get spayed, HE came back neutered. When we first started bonding all they wanted to do was mount one another. We started bonding in the bathroom and had daily car rides. The car rides helped A LOT. I was so excited when I saw the boys lay down together for the first time. I knew they were going to make it and be best buddies! It took about two to two and a half months to get them bonded. Now, they do everything together...especially get into trouble. They groom each other constantly. I'm so happy that they love each other. They are brothers and best friends!

When the bond breaks - Shiri Joshua: Zoe (AKA "The Queen") and Stuart were a bonded pair for 2 years. About two months after Stuarts death it seemed to me that Zoe might benefit from having a new partner again. So I found Armani.

When we got home I took all the precautions of introducing a new rabbit: took both him and Zoe to a new, neutral room in the house. They sniffed each other for a long time and even sounded a few growls (from the Queen), to which Armani seemed to be oblivious.



After the usual business of "who's the boss" all-day all-night mounting (turns out Armani was), there seemed to be a really good chemistry and a new couple formed. They would curl up together, lick and groom each other, play with each other until it was time for one to go to the vet. It was usually Zoe that had to go (and is still fighting numerous bacterial infections and eye discharge) and each time upon returning Armani would constantly growl at her and chase her. I guess the unfamiliar scent from the vet and technicians was the trigger. I even tried taking them both to the next visit but nothing seemed to help.

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I keep them separated now by providing a huge child-play area and taking turns for who's out and who's in. I am saddened sometimes when I see one trying to get to the other by sneaking their head through the cage for grooming, and in the case of Zoe, most times the request for grooming ends up with a bite from her estranged husband!.

At Long Last...Maybe - by Sudarshan Deshmukh: A few months after I adopted Shakti, I took her to meet Jeffy Batu at a pet show our group was attending. Jeffy Batu and Shakti really seemed to like each other and got along well at the show. I caged Shakti and Jeffy Batu side by side and I took all the



necessary precautions, trying to bond them in neutral territory while keeping brooms, spray bottles and veggies on hand.

Session after session they ignored each other. I took them for car rides and tried bonding them at the vet's: and they were not interested in each other. Eventually, they did show interest - in fighting. Jeffy gashed Shakti's ear badly and I stopped trying to bond them for a while. I waited six months for them to give up their grudge, and then made one final commitment to bonding. After several sessions in neutral territory (and a lot of spray bottle action!), Shakti finally began licking Jeffy Batu.

It's been a long process since then, but

there is now mutual grooming, a strong friendship...and, well, a few minor 'tiffs' here and there! Eventually I hope to house them together but, at least for now, they can run around together happily for hours.

Possible defeat: - by Crystal Ford:

The first time Gilbert and Olivia met was at Olivia's foster home. All went really well there, a couple of sniffs and basically ignoring each other. Both rabbits were in a foreign environment which likely aided in the nice results. But I soon learned they were two dominant bunnies, which resulted in injuries during the second bonding session.

The fighting started almost immediately with Gilbert trying to mount and Olivia spinning in circles trying to reach Gilbert to mount him, until they were a tight ball of aggression. Olivia was the one who ended up injured. It appeared she had only torn her ear which didn't require much treatment. She seemed fine until she stopped eating about 5 days later. It was then that I found a huge (the size of a toonnie) abscess on her abdomen, up near her top left mammary gland (she is a long-haired rabbit which made detecting the injury more difficult). I



thought she was going to die. She eventually recovered over the next two and a half months.

Olivia was not spayed at the time of the failed bonding session. I knew there was

risk involved in trying to bond when she was not spayed, but at the time I thought I would never be able to have Olivia spayed because of a heart condition (detected and misdiagnosed through x-rays and two ultrasounds).

She was just spayed a couple of weeks ago, and I still see a lot of dominant aggressive behaviour in her. At this point in time I do not plan to try to bond them again. Olivia has already almost lost her life twice and she isn't even two years old yet. I don't want her to have to battle for her life anytime again soon, and certainly not because of my desire to have them bonded. I think that their lives are both enriched by having such close contact with each other (through the pen wall) and that they are both happier bunnies despite not being able to live together.

A Final Word

One important thing to remember when adopting another rabbit: 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 a bonded friend 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 overly 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 to us.

(We thank the members for their submissions)

Wound Management

After any bonding session it's wise to check both rabbits for bite wounds and scratches. Remember, not all bite wounds bleed, so check your rabbits thoroughly.

Any bite wounds should be cleaned and disinfected with diluted Betadine or

Novalsan or Chlorhexidine solution. Use Neosporin or Bactriban (mupirocin) antibiotic ointment for minor wounds. (Do not use Neosporin Plus, which contains a pain medication). Ask your vet for a small sample of his or her preferred disinfectant to keep on

hand. A styptic pencil or powder or flour will help stop a bleeding broken nail.

Check bite wounds for swelling and err on the side of caution. Abscesses can occur very quickly. If your rabbit has been bitten, take him to the vet as soon as possible.