

Bunny Bonding Basics

House rabbits are social by nature. Rabbits can be deeply emotional creatures and often crave the companionship of their own kind. They form bonds that are so powerful that loss of a companion can cause depression and illness. Like any relationship, though, the bonding process itself can be slow and may take patience, time and a commitment from you to foster the relationship.

Before attempting an introduction of two rabbits, both must be spayed or neutered. Bonding is generally easier if both are fixed. You need to wait at least two weeks (preferably four weeks) after the surgery before attempting introductions. This allows time for the rabbit to heal and for hormones to balance. Males can stay fertile for up to 6 weeks after neutering and may still exhibit hormonal behavior in this time.

Rabbits are extremely territorial, and may exhibit behaviors such as territorial droppings, chinning, urinating, and aggressive behavior such as chasing, batting, and biting. Introductions should be done in a neutral space to minimize the occurrence of these behaviors. Rabbits are not quick to forget, so an initial fight could hinder future bonding success.

A neutral space may include:

- A pen in an area of the house your rabbit is not usually in. Make the space small enough so you can control the interactions and make sure there are no small spaces a bunny could get trapped in if being attacked.
- A bathroom the resident bunny has not been in before.
- A bathtub.



If the bunnies show any signs of aggression, try:

- A laundry basket on top of a dryer that is on.
- The backseat of a moving car. The noise is slightly frightening to the bunnies and they may snuggle up and draw comfort from each other creating positive memories of each other. (They will associate the other rabbit with a sense of security.)

It is advised you wear thick gloves and a long-sleeved shirt for the initial bonding sessions in case a fight ensues. A squirt of water on the nose can often prevent an aggressive behavior if it is done before the act begins, but is usually not effective once a fight has broken out.

Initial “bunny dates” may help to decide which companion will be best suited for your rabbit. Bunny dates last from a few minutes to 15 minutes a session, and your bunny is allowed to meet with 3-5 potential mates.

Bunnies, like humans have very different personalities. When two bunnies meet initially, several outcomes may occur:

- The most likely outcome is tentative friendship—they will keep an eye on each other and may approach and sniff but will not groom each other.
- Sometimes the date consists of one chasing/one running—make sure the one running does not start fighting and that he/she is not getting hurt. There may need to be a longer introduction period before they will fully bond and will need more work and attention to building the relationship.
- Sometimes, one rabbit humps the other. This is OK as long as the rabbit on the bottom (submissive) is accepting it. They are working out who’s the boss. The tables may turn later in the same date. Make sure both buns noses can be seen so they are not biting in sensitive areas during the interaction.
- Less common, but possible is love at first sight. The bunnies may groom each other or cuddle with each other.
- Also uncommon, but possible is outright fighting. Separate the rabbits immediately to prevent them from hurting each other. This will be a harder relationship to build, but it can be done.

Bonding can take anywhere from a few days to a year or more. Work with the rabbits daily for at least 15 minutes. The more often you work with them, the quicker the process may progress (usually!). If the rabbits have a bad experience, or if one of the rabbits is elderly or has health considerations, you may need to take it slower, or take some time off. Rabbits that are not fully bonded need to be kept separate when you are not with them. Once the rabbits have bonded, DO NOT separate them. If a rabbit needs to go to the vet, both need to go. If they are apart and one rabbit comes back with a different smell or change in health, they may reject each other and begin fighting.

Bonding Dos & Don'ts

DO—House the rabbits separately but close together. They will get used to seeing each other and each other's scent if they are close to each other. Make sure the cages are not close enough for them to be able to bite each other.

DO—Be prepared for this to take several months.

DO—Let your rabbit choose their partner. The bonding process will go easier and in the long run, your bun will have to share its space with this new bun. (Your mom can't choose your friends for you, it's something you want to do on your own.)

DO—Expect that there will be bumps and setbacks.

DO—Make the effort to think like a bunny. Is a bunny jealous that you are interacting with the new bun/resident bun? Is he/she mad you just gave his favorite toy to another bun? Is the bunny stressed and ready to stop for the day?

DO—Interact with the buns, but give equal attention and provide a positive/relaxed atmosphere.

Don't—Play favorites. At all. EVER!

Don't—Expect love at first sight.

Don't—Hold a bonding session in the resident bunny's territory until after the bunnies can spend at least 30 minutes together in neutral space. Be prepared for the resident bunny to potentially be defensive or aggressive at first.

Don't—Try to bond if you have had a bad day—your emotions will transfer to the bunnies and can undo weeks of work.

Don't—Leave the bunnies unsupervised, even for a minute, until they are fully bonded.

Don't—Assume that because yesterday went well, today will, too. They are working through relationship/dominance/territory issues similar to those humans do during a dating process.

Don't—End on a bad note, if at all possible.

Reference

House Rabbit Handbook—How to live with an urban rabbit by Marinell Harriman
Available for purchase through MCRS, PETCO, and most local bookstores.



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The Minnesota Companion Rabbit Society (MCRS) is a volunteer-based, non-profit organization whose primary goals are education and adoption. By educating the public and assisting humane organizations, MCRS works to reduce the number of unwanted rabbits and improve the lives of companion rabbits. Through adoption, MCRS helps rabbits from area shelters and animal control facilities find permanent homes.