



Rabbit Advice: Bonding

Disclaimer: These notes are only based on my own experience and are not set in stone. They have worked for me and people who have adopted a bunny from Windwhistle Warren, I hope they will help you too.

If this is the first time you have bonded a pair of rabbits, my tip is to do it at your own speed. Do not get anxious and worry about what other people are telling you. It is a big responsibility and I have heard of some disasters where rabbits have sustained serious injuries.

If you are adopting a rabbit from a rescue, your rescue may be able to help with the bonding. A lot of us are happy to do the bonding for you on neutral territory, particularly if it means we find a wonderful home for one of our rescue bunnies! Generally a bonding takes between 1 - 3 days and means you leave your beloved pet in the care of the rescue for this period, but at least you are returning home with a bonded pair.

The 3 most important details for successful bondings are:

- Both rabbits should be neutered to reduce any hormonal angst.
- A bonding is much more likely to work if the rabbits are different genders.
- Neutral territory is necessary for face to face meetings.

I have never found age, colour, size, breed to be a problem.

On the first day, the rabbits need to get used to and accept each other's scent. Your aim is for them to be comfortable in each other's company with the safety of wire between them. The signs you are looking for is them lying companionably either side of the wire, as close as they can be to each other. Any aggression (e.g. angry pawing at the wire towards the other rabbit) is not a good sign.

They each need a separate hutch for night time. Ideally next to each other so they are able to continue safe contact. On day two, swap them into the territory the other rabbit occupied the previous day. At night put them in the other rabbit's hutch.

If you feel the rabbits are contentedly communing with each other you may choose to try them both together. It is vital for this stage that you use a neutral territory where neither rabbit has been before. It may be a shed, a garage, utility room, next doors garage. Somewhere with a lot of boxes, tubes etc, plenty of space (if possible) and bits of food for them to find is best. The idea is that they will be so keen on nosing around they will be too busy foraging to entertain attacking their companion.

If they ignore each other - brilliant. Do not intervene and try to force them towards each other, allow them to progress in their own time.

The more dominant bunny may put its tail up and lunge or mount its partner to be. The other bunny may skip over the top kicking its heels. There may be some circling; there may be a bit of fur pulling. If it is just fur pulling, do not intervene. Obviously if it is more serious you must separate them to prevent injuries. I am sure if a rabbit is hurt by another it will remember and it takes a long time to rebuild their trust in each other. Be careful you do not get bitten yourself!

If it is necessary to separate them, continue with the slow bonding ideas, swapping them into each other's space. Then the next day try the neutral territory again, and so on and so forth. If however, they are getting on well do not leave them unattended until they are completely at ease in each other's company. This means that they will be lying next to each other, eating from the same dish together and mutually grooming.

When they return to 'home territory', i.e. the place you intend them to live, make sure it is thoroughly cleaned and disinfected if it was the home of one of the pair. This is a crucial part of the bonding. The rabbit who owned the territory may not take kindly to another rabbit moving in and I have had a few occasions where the previous sole occupant has at this final stage decided to attack their new friend.

The above is for a fairly simple straight forward bonding. However, I have certainly had bondings that take longer than my usual 1, 2 or 3 days. One pair took me 6 weeks. They were both big rabbits, and the one rabbit had been badly hurt by another in the past. His new wife-to-be was a patient, adorable girl. If she had not been so tolerant, I do not know if the bonding would have been successful in the end.

I would put the rabbits in their neutral territory and after 3 or so minutes the buck would fly at the doe. So, I kept returning them to their separate territories, swapping them over. What was so obvious was that provided the safety of wire was there, the buck was relaxed and enjoyed her company. Without it he was terrified of being hurt again.

I would put them both in a carry box, and take them on a car journey. This often breaks the ice as they are sharing a frightening experience and are drawn to each other for comfort. There were no squabbles whilst travelling, but it did not complete the bonding. So, I tried shrieking at him when he launched himself. Worked once.

I only needed to use my final weapon twice for him to get the message. When he went into attack I used a jet of water from a child's water pistol. He was so surprised and he needed to wash his face. As I mentioned the second time he decided to submit graciously. Bunny lovers do not worry, it was summer, and they were both so very happy together it was worth the stress and worry, to me as well to them!