

# Bonding and bonded bunnies essay sample



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Rabbits are very sociable creatures, which means that most rabbits like to have a friend to snuggle with, play with and live with. Finding a bunny friend for your rabbit can be easy, but equally, it can be very challenging to find bunnies that suit each other.

Bonding rabbits does not depend on a rabbit's age or breed; what it depends on is the personality of each rabbit. This means that a continental giant could bond with a netherland dwarf, or a young spayed/neutered bunny could bond with a geriatric bunny.

Bonding rabbits does not depend solely on the gender either. The easiest and most traditional bond is a male and female, and this can also be the easiest to succeed with. The next easiest bond is the female to female, followed by male to male. However, it is possible to bond all combinations if the rabbits' personalities allow that to happen.

It can be hard to bond rabbits, and even when bonded, they can still separate or divorce. This means bonding is never an exact science and can evolve and change with time, and it is important that any rabbit owner is prepared for the possibility that they may end up with unbonded bunnies and be willing to deal with that if it arises.

When you are bonding your own bunnies you need to know and learn as much as possible in order to do the best thing possible for your bunnies.

#### Different ages of rabbits and bonding

When bonding rabbits you have to look carefully at the ages and be aware of the potential difficulties for each age.

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~ Baby rabbits. A baby rabbit is anything from birth until adolescence. It is important to remember that rabbits should generally not be away from mum until 8 weeks old, and should not be sold or rehomed before this point. Baby rabbits don't have hormones so can act very cuddly and friendly, which can make them easily adaptable to having a bonded friend. They also still feel the need to huddle with other rabbits, similar to when they were in the nest and they also have no territorial issues, which again can also make bonding easier. Adolescence can cause extreme problems though so be aware of that.

~ Adolescent rabbits. The age a rabbit hits adolescence can vary from rabbit to rabbit; however for a buck (boy) it is generally around the time when his testicles drop (when this happens depends on the breed; generally it is later in bigger bunnies, but can be anything from 3-6 months- Unknown (unknown), and may also occur later than that, or earlier), although he may feel/act hormonal before that. Adolescence is generally later in does (girls), and on average happens at 4-5 months and onwards, but again, it can happen either earlier or later.

When rabbits go through adolescence, it is very common for them to unbond from siblings, bonded friends or mum. This is to do with the surge of hormones and the way it can affect them. This means if you have rabbits on adolescent age living with each other it can be sensible to separate them before they fight, and then rebond them back together once they have both been spayed/neutered. Obviously, if you have two rabbits living together and one is a male and one is a female it is sensible to split them up to avoid any accidental breeding problems.

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~ Unneutered/unspayed adults. Each adult rabbit will behave slightly differently. The surge of hormones that adolescence brings will have eased, which means it is possible to bond a fully intact adult, if the adult will allow it and if the other bunny can tolerate the actions of a hormonal rabbit (such as humping or chasing). Whilst it is sometimes possible, it should really only be a feasible option if for some reason the rabbit can not be neutered/spayed, such as having a problem that prevents them going under anaesthetic.

If you try to bond an unneutered male to an unspayed female rabbit, this will be dangerous and potentially you will end up with at least a litter of kittens. This is obviously not advisable and the rabbits will have to be split instantly anyway.

If you try to bond an unneutered male with a spayed female then the unneutered male can drive the female to distraction with the mounting and chasing, and this can often lead to fighting.

If you try to bond an unneutered male with an unneutered male you will inevitably end up with fights from both sides and this can be incredibly nasty and would be irresponsible to try.

If you try to bond an unneutered male with a neutered male this will also inevitably end up in fights and possibly additional injury to the unneutered male (such as if he tries to mount the face of the other rabbit and the other rabbit bites him).

If you try to bond an unspayed female with an unspayed female then they may fight due to issues surrounding territory, and this can be nasty for both rabbits.

If you try to bond an unspayed female to a spayed female this may result in the unspayed female fighting due to territory.

If you try to bond an unspayed female to a neutered male, then it can result in fighting if the girl is territorial. She may also frustrate the male if she tries to mount him when her hormones are raging, which can also lead to fighting.

If you try to bond an unspayed doe to an unneutered male you, again, face the risk of kittens, and the rabbits would have to be split instantly. This is not advisable.

~ Neutered/spayed adults. An adult is a rabbit that has calmed down after adolescence. This varies from rabbit to rabbit and breed to breed, although generally adulthood occurs later in the bigger buns. This is the best and most reliable group to bond, provided the hormones have died down after being neutered or spayed (see 'Other things to remember' section). This is the group that, if bonded, stand the most chance of not unbonding along the way (although it is still a possibility).

The age a rabbit can be spayed/neutered depends on when the vet is willing to operate, but for boys it can be as soon as the testicles descend, and for girls it can be around 4-5 months. Vets have their own preferences and reasoning for when they spay/neuter so always ask and listen to why they do what they do.

## Ways to bond

There are two main ways to bond. Some people prefer one way and stick with that, but often you need to adjust the process you use to suit the rabbits you are bonding because one way can suit different rabbits better than the other way might.

1- Put the bunnies together and do not separate. This is pretty much what it says. The rabbits go together (on neutral territory) and stay together. Doing it this way can be less stressful on some rabbits (but more stressful on others).

This method can work well for bunnies who need minimal stress. Some bunnies can get stomach upsets (such as diarrhoea) when dating and this method can sometimes work better to reduce stress. This method can work well for a large number of bunnies, the list is not exhaustive, but for some bunnies the choice of which way to bond is clearer.

When you put the rabbits together, they will need to be fully supervised (i. e. overnight as well as during the day) for a minimum of 48 hours, although for some rabbits it will need to be longer.

2- Bunny Dating. This is also pretty much what it says. This involves effectively dating the rabbits and then splitting them up after their date. Ideally the length of times of the dates would increase before moving them in together, but there is no set time for a date, just what works well for each rabbit. This method can be less stressful for some bunnies, but equally, for others it can be more stressful.

This method can work well for bunnies who are very anxious of other rabbits because they can grow in confidence and feel safe around the other rabbit. It can work well for many other types too; the list is not exhaustive, this is just the group of bunnies that comes to mind.

When the bunnies first move in together they should also have full supervision for a minimum of 48 hours, although you can move them in when you trust that they should be ok together, which makes it a bit less stressful on us.

Important things to remember

- ~ Always have the rabbits meet on neutral territory. This means that they won't be territorial and are more likely to be accepting of another rabbit.
  - ~ Always finish on a high note. If the rabbits have squabbled then ending on a high note might just be a treat (that you know the rabbit's can tolerate) of some form for each rabbit to make it end pleasantly.
  - ~ Always supervise the rabbits. This is important because when rabbits are still bonding they can easily snap and start to fight. If you are there, then you can break up a fight, and also you can see what happened in the run up to the fight, which can allow you to work out what caused the fight and to help the buns move forward from the incident.
  - ~ Always keep calm. Never be anxious when you have rabbits together. Even if you want to feel anxious, force yourself to be calm, because they will pick up on whatever emotion you feel. This also means it is important not to feel any extreme emotions when bonding. Do not do any bonding if you are
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feeling upset, excited, or anything else that could transmit to the rabbit and change their behaviour if they pick up on it.

~ Progress at the pace of the rabbits. This means not to push them to bond faster, or progress onto the next stage of bonding unless you feel they are ready. If you push it faster than the rabbits feel able to cope with, it might end up in a fight and the rabbits might take a dislike to each other, so it could be counter productive. If you watch your rabbits and get used to their behaviour you will see it change as they become comfortable with each stage. They will tell you when they feel comfortable enough to cope with more contact with the other rabbit.

~ Always have a towel (or similar) handy to diffuse any nasty situations. Having a towel, or pillow case or anything that can be dropped on a rabbit to cover the eyes can be useful. If somehow the bonding doesn't go very well and you need to divert a rabbit or completely separate them, then dropping a towel on them can often (but not always) make them calmer. Most rabbits won't move when they can't see, although you will always get the awkward ones who will keep trying to fight. Using a towel can mean you are safer and shouldn't sustain any injuries from either a bite or a claw. Another option is thick gloves, although they can't be dropped over a rabbits eyes to calm them down.

~Bond healthy bunnies. Ideally it is best to bond only healthy bunnies because if you try to bond a bunny who is ill, then the bonding may go wrong, when had the bunnies both been healthy it might have worked, or the bonding might work, but if the bunny gets healthy it may not. This is because



some rabbits can be aggressive when they feel low, and also, the healthy rabbit can often sense a ‘weakness’ so could try to be dominant in a situation that normally s/he might be submissive in.

~Always move the rabbits into neutral territory when they are bonded. Once your bunnies are bonded they will move in together. Often this is into accommodation that one rabbit knows and considers to be his/her territory, however it is important that the territory is neutral to ensure that the bonding boat is not rocked at all.

If the rabbits are moving to territory that is known to one then it is important to neutralise the area. This involves using a distilled vinegar solution on the whole area. Neat distilled vinegar is fine and safe for rabbits, but a 50-50 solution with water can work fine. This can mean scrubbing, or sprayed (such as onto mesh) to whole area so that the area smells of neither rabbit.

Things you can try in preparation before meeting.

~ Swapping the contents of the hutches over. Swapping over things like litter trays, food bowls, water bowls/bottles and toys can get a rabbit used to having another rabbit’s scent in their territory.

~ Swapping the rabbits in their hutches/enclosures. Swapping the rabbits over in their hutches can mean that they get used to being in the territory of the other rabbit.

~ Adjoining/close accommodation. It can be worth having the rabbits’ accommodations so that they can see each other, and, if possible interact with each other (although some might attack through large holes, so make

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sure it is smaller mesh). This can mean the rabbits can bond even when you are not doing anything to actively encourage the bonding along.

~ Adjoining runs. If your rabbit has a run away from where they normally live, you can put the runs next to each other and allow the rabbits to spend days next to each other, which works in a similar way to using close/adjoining accommodation.

Things you can try when the rabbits physically meet- (This is generally more used for the bunny dating method).

~ Taking the rabbits on a car journey. Rabbits find the car uncomfortable so are inclined to huddle together. This can make them see each other as 'safe'. A good way to do this is to ask someone to drive and for you to sit on the back seat with a rabbit on either side (preferably in a carry case, or similar) and then, when the car engine has started, move one rabbit over next to the other.

~ Putting the rabbits the bath. This has to be done in a dry bath, with no water. The surfaces of a bath are slippery and the rabbits find it hard to move around, which means they often move little and huddle together; also if the rabbits are going to fight, it makes it harder for them to do so, which can make a difficult bonding safer. It is important to make sure that the rabbits don't jump out and that there has been nothing potentially poisonous in the bath before putting them in.

~ Using Vanilla Flavouring/Essence. Just a tiny dab slightly above the rabbit's nose can over power a rabbit's sense of smell. This means that any new

rabbits around are not smelt out and so might be accepted better. This can work well if the rabbits have had some sort of disagreement in the bonding process.

~ Using food. Eating can be a bonding experience for rabbits, so having some food or hay around can be a good way for them to sit down and have a munch together. However, some bunnies can become possessive over food (especially those that have not always had all the food they need), so sometimes novelty foods like pellets or treats can have a negative effect. Hay can tend to work effectively, so having one big pile or several piles in any area where bonding is taking place can help.

~ Use a circular run/area. When you bond the rabbits, it can be better for the rabbits if there are no corners to get ‘stuck in’, or cornered in, and also no small spaces, so a circular run can work well because there are neither of these. Using a circular run is not the only option though; there are many ways to deal with this, such as using a bed.

~ Use toys that don’t smell of either rabbit. If you use toys that smell of another rabbit, or of no rabbits, then it means neither rabbit will feel protective of his or her toy. You can then use the same toys specifically for bonding and they will associate them with being together.

~ Assisting the bonding. If you are confident that you know which is the dominant and which is the submissive rabbit, then you can try smearing banana on the dominant rabbit to encourage the submissive rabbit to groom him/her. This is only an option if the rabbits have sorted out who is going to be dominant and you can read their language enough to understand which is

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which. If you smear banana on the ‘wrong’ bunny then you could upset the relationship of the pair and the dominant/submissive standing might get confused, and the rabbits might be more likely to fight.

Things to look out for

There are lots of behaviours that might be seen when bonding rabbits. The ones described here are by no means all you will see, but they are behaviours that could (and in some instances, should) pop up along the way. These are isolated behaviours, so to be aware of what you are seeing, you need to start to look at the whole picture, not just the isolated action.

Remember, if you see any behaviour that could potentially cause problems and lead to a fight, then you need to divert the rabbits before it actually leads to a fight. There is no reason for a rabbit to fight another rabbit during the bonding process, because responsible and attentive owners will be able to head off a fight before it starts.

~ Grooming. When a rabbit grooms another, this is a good sign. Often it is the dominant rabbit that is groomed first, but not always.

~ Lying together. Lying together is also a good sign, because it means the rabbits feel relaxed and safe with each other.

~ Head down. You might see one, or both of the rabbits, approach the other bunny, or each other, with their heads down. This is an indication that that rabbit wants to be boss and wants to be groomed. Always watch this because if both bunnies want to be dominant it could progress to something

nasty. The picture shows two bunnies with their heads down, both wanting the other to groom him/her.

~ Ears pointing forward. This can indicate that a rabbit is very interested in something in front of him/her, so this can be a positive sign.

~ ‘ Bobbing’. By bobbing, I mean when a rabbit goes long and low to the floor and moves his or head up and down slowly, whilst approaching something. In this instance it would be another rabbit. Bobbing indicates that they are interested in what is going on, but are not entirely sure of the situation so are being cautious. The picture shows two bonding rabbits bobbing towards a Furby that was being used to assist with the bonding process.

~ Ignoring each other. When rabbits ignore each there is both hope that it will turn out well and also the potential for it to turn out not so well. This means that if you work through things and do thing positively then you should be able to have a successful bonding.

~ Mounting. Rabbits mount for two reasons, firstly, hormones and secondly for dominance. If your rabbit is not spayed or neutered or has only recently been ‘ done’ then it could be hormonal; however if the hormones have died down in your bunny, then it is most likely to be a dominance issue. This is very normal behaviour (be it the ‘ correct’ way, or the ‘ opposite’ way), however, if the rabbit being mounted is not overly keen then it can escalate to circling, although it is also very common for a rabbit to sit and take it, or for chasing to follow. If you are watching carefully then you should be able to

work out if the rabbit being humped is tolerating it and if it is ok to let it continue.

There can be risks with mounting. If a male rabbit is continually mounting another rabbit then he can make himself sore on his penis and become inflamed and also sometimes infected (this can occur at any time when bunnies are bonded too). So remember to check the boy if you think he is doing a lot of mounting.

Also, if the boy is mounting the 'wrong way', then there is a risk of the penis being bitten, which can be a horrific wound and needs immediate veterinary attention.

~ Thumping feet. Rabbits thump their feet for many reasons. This can be fear, or it could be warning off another rabbit. Equally it could be excitement at being with another bunny. When this happens, it is just worth keeping a careful eye on the situation to make sure that nothing escalates as this can be a warning sign.

~ Ears flat. If the rabbit is advancing towards the other rabbit and s/he has his/her ears flat against the neck then this can indicate a hostile feeling. If this happens, it is worth gently directing the hostile bunny away to avoid any potential issues. When you get to know your rabbit and read the body language, you will start to notice little flickers of the ears where they dip slightly backwards and then come upright again. This movement shows the rabbit is not impressed and is on alert to attack if necessary, and that can tell you exactly how the bunny is feeling, even before s/he properly shows it.

~ Running and jumping over. This is generally what hormonal or recently spayed girls do. It's a way of flirting with the other rabbit to make them chase them (which is a key part to the mating process and getting the lady 'in the mood'). This can confuse the other bunny, and can also lead to a situation that you need to diffuse. When the rabbit does not respond, the hormonal rabbit might start to get more insistent, sometimes running into the other rabbit and then jumping over. If this keeps happening, it may mean that the rabbits are not yet ready to be bonded; however you can still do the ground work in terms of doing lots of bonding without them actually meeting.

~ Nipping. Either rabbit might nip the other. This is ok as long as both rabbits are tolerating it, and is a sign that they are trying to sort out their dominance issues. Little nips are ok, but full on biting is not, although that comes under fighting. However, little nips can quickly escalate into something more serious if you are not paying attention and not proactive enough to stop it, if one or both rabbits are getting stressed by the situation.

~ Chasing. Rabbits commonly chase each other and chasing is ok provided both rabbits tolerate it. If a rabbit looks stressed by it then stop it, because it can potentially lead to circling or other signs a fight could happen.

~ Lifting the tail. Rabbits have scent glands beside their anus and when they lift their tail they are marking their scent. This can mean they do not feel comfortable with the other rabbit, or that they want to be the dominant one. This can also be due to hormones. Sometimes circling or fighting can follow a

lifted tail, other times it can be a benign action. Once again, it comes down to being vigilant with an action that could potentially turn nasty.

~ Circling. This is where one bunny goes to nose the tail of the other, and the other bunny then spins round and they then circle nose to tail. This must be stopped immediately because it can lead to fighting.

~ Fighting. A full on rabbit fight is really intense and really loud. People often question how they will know when it is a fight, and the answer to that is just that you will know. It might start with the bunnies rearing up at each other and boxing. The rabbits will probably lay on their sides and attack each other with their teeth and all the paws. They might also ricochet off anything in the vicinity. This should never be allowed to happen and you should always stop a fight before it breaks out. This means stopping them when they start to circle, or when they rear up at each other.

Other things to remember

~ Bonding rabbits can take varying amounts of time. A quick bond might take a few days of dating or after 48 hours of being together be clearly happily bonded, however a tougher and harder bond can take months or even years, but if you persevere it should have a positive outcome.

~ Each time you bond rabbits it will be a different experience and will need to be taken as different from any other previous bonding. You might find that your rabbits can tolerate longer periods of time together, or you might find they need very regular short bursts of only a few minutes. Try to read from

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your rabbits as to what works for them, and work out how you are going to help them, based on how they act.

~ Rabbits are most active at dawn and dusk and generally sleep during the day. It can often be best to bond bunnies at the time they are most likely to be sleeping because then they are less likely to fight. Generally this is in the middle of the day.

~ If you are looking to add another rabbit to bond with your own then it is always worth having a 'bunny date' before making a decision. A 'bunny date' can give a vague idea as to whether two rabbits are suited to each other. If the date goes well it does not necessarily mean bonding will be easy, and definitely does not mean the bonding process is complete, because the situation can change when your rabbit gets back onto his/her territory, or when they feel safer. If a bunny date goes badly, it does not mean that there is not potential for the rabbits to bond, but it may mean there is a lot of hard work involved if they are to bond. However the 'bunny date' goes, there is always the possibility that they won't bond, but the date is just to give an indication of the potential ease of bonding.

~ It is unadvisable to have rabbits stay together permanently without supervision after only meeting during the day. When rabbits are together they are more likely to fight at dusk and dawn. This is the time when rabbits are most active, so it is the time when they are most likely to fight. This generally applies to freshly bonded rabbits the most, which is why it is not sensible to assume that they will be ok over night, just because they have been ok during the day.

~ When a buck has been neutered, he is still able to 'make babies' for 6-8 weeks after a neuter, so never put a freshly neutered buck with an unspayed female, even if she is a baby. Wait until 2 months after the buck has been neutered.

~When rabbits are neutered or spayed it, does not instantly kill the hormones and the hormones can remain for 2-3 months after a spay or neuter, so allow time for the hormones to calm down. This is especially key if the rabbits are being bonded very soon after being spayed or neutered and it is not going very well. In this situation it might be that if you wait for a while until the hormones have died down, the bonding might be more successful.

~ The breeding season can play a part in how rabbits act, even if they are spayed/neutered and the hormones have died down. The breeding season in the UK is from January and goes to August. In this time, you might find your rabbits might exhibit more hormonal behaviour or get a bit funny with each other (particularly on sunny days in April and May). When it is not breeding season, wild bucks leave their burrows and warrens to find new communities to be accepted into. This can mean that that it is genetically imprinted in domestic rabbits to be more accepting of new rabbits outside the breeding season, around September to November. This can be a useful tool for those tough bonds.

Once the bonding is complete.

There is no specific time to know when the bonding is complete. Generally it is a combination of how much you trust the rabbits to be together

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unsupervised and also how the rabbits act together. This can be anything from meeting a couple of times to taking months to fully bond, or, if you have just put them together, it can be from after 48 hours to over a week or so.

For the first night or two when they are together, it is ideal if they can be supervised to ensure there are no problems. Given that rabbit fights are loud, a baby intercom can work well, or, if possible, sleeping by their hutch/run would also work.

When your rabbits are fully bonded they should both be happy with each other and should feel confident around each other.

At this point your hard work is done (for now) and hopefully the rabbits will live happily together for the rest of their lives. Fully Bonded Rabbits.

~ Rabbits are most commonly kept in pairs however it is very possible to add to that (going through the same processes and ensuring that its the right rabbit/s involved). Which can mean you can have a trio...

...or quad...

...or more are real options (but do carry risks). If you do decide you want to add to your pair, always be aware that it could destabilise their bond; alternatively it could give them another furry friend to play with and interact with. If you choose to add another rabbit, or more, to your group, try to look carefully at what you think might work with your group – male or female, boisterous or quiet, dominant or submissive, old or young – and then you might have a better idea as to what might work. When you get to bigger

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groups of bunnies, it can often be easier to add to that group, than it is to bond two rabbits.

~ Bonded rabbits can ‘ divorce’ at any point, even after being together for years. The reasons for this could be health, the introduction of other animals to the bonded group or into their lives, an upset, or many other things, so it is always worth while to have something on hand to separate them into if necessary.

~ Rabbits may struggle if they are separated from their bonded friend. If they have to be separated, they may need a bit of rebonding (such as car rides or vanilla) in order to rebond. Therefore it is advisable to keep them together, such as on trips to the vets. Some rabbits are ok with being separated, so it comes down to knowing your bunnies and what works for them, and for you. If you have a rabbit that needs an operation, then when they come home to recover, a good thing to do is have the rabbits in separate areas but joined, so that they can have company and can still groom each other. This means you can monitor the rabbit who has been operated on (in terms of poo, wee, eating and drinking), and the two buns can still be together, yet one won’t mask any potential problems if they arise.

~ It is an unfortunate fact that generally one of a pair might outlive the other. If one of your rabbits who is bonded loses a bonded buddy, then it is very important for the remaining rabbit to spent time with the body of the dead rabbit (for a couple of hours or so, depending on the situation). This allows the remaining rabbit to grieve and understand that that rabbit is

gone, to accept the situation and move on. If the rabbit disappears suddenly the remaining rabbit might struggle to accept the situation and is more likely to be unsettled. This can be hard for us to watch, but it is essential for the welfare of the rabbit. There is a time when it is not appropriate however, and that is when the rabbit who died, has died from something contagious and the remaining rabbit has not been exposed to the illness.

Watching rabbits run around, relax and play together is a lovely thing to watch, and it will show you that all the hard work you put in has been worth it!