Midwest Rabbit Rescue & Re-home
Guidelines for Bonding Two Rabbits

Rescue and Adoption Center
886 North Holbrook
Plymouth, Michigan 48170

Mailing Address
2232 South Main Street, Box 536
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48103

248-912-7976

adoptions@rabbitrr.org

www.rabbitrr.org
Introduction
Providing a rabbit with a companion is one of the best things you can do for him, and you'll enjoying having a pair. In this document we'll give you guidelines for bonding a new rabbit to your bunny. Two of the most important attributes you can bring to the process are careful observation and patience. It generally takes one to four weeks before the bunnies are living comfortably together. Your primary job is to give them supervised time together, and help them overcome any resistance they may have. Once they do bond, they are very sweet and unbelievably cute together.

Rabbits are very territorial. As a result, when introducing a new rabbit, either or both rabbits may exhibit some aggression towards the other one. This will eventually pass, but initially they can be resistant to the other rabbits presence in their space. Remember that they are just fearful for their space and safety - and that it will pass once they learn they are safe. You will help them by being a calm influence.

Selecting a Companion
When selecting a companion for your bunny, you'll want one of the opposite sex. Same sex couples are rare. Most are siblings who've never been separated. Likewise, trios of rabbits are very rare. Differences in breed, size and age don't really matter as far as successful bonding.

We recommend bringing your bunny to our rescue center, where you both can meet possible companions. He or she can have several “speed dates” with our residents. Keep in mind that what we'll be looking for is a big negative reaction - such as an immediate fight between the two rabbits. In that case, we usually try another rabbit (although it doesn't mean the pair wouldn’t bond, just that it will probably be a more difficult process.) Love-at-first-sight reactions are rare, and are not required for two rabbits to be compatible. We'll observe the rabbits together to judge their compatibility. It's not unusual for one to hump the other, or for their to be some chasing. Such behavior is normal as they work out their relationship. It's also not unusual for the bunnies to groom or cuddle a bit - and then hump or chase afterwards.

We usually limit the number of introductions to three rabbits in a single day. After three, most visiting rabbits seem a little overwhelmed, and we give them a break. You can learn about our adoptable rabbits on our website (www.rabbitrr.org) ahead of time, so that you've narrowed the field before you come in.

Both rabbits will go home together in a single carrier. This actually is their first bonding “exercise”. They won't like the cramped space or the car ride. (They usually won't fight in such a small space because there's too much risk to themselves in the confined space.) Therefore, they'll find comfort in one another's presence, which is one of the steps in the bonding process. Note that depending on how they behaved during the introduction, we might recommend that you take them home in separate carriers if you are alone; we wouldn't want to risk a fight while are driving and unavailable to supervise.

Bringing Home the New Bunny
As mentioned, rabbits are very territorial. The bonding process is, essentially, helping them through their natural instinct to defend their territory. Your bunny may feel the need to defend its environment. The new bunny, who already has to contend with a complete change in his or her
environment, may feel the need to establish a safe territory for himself. For these reasons, you’ll make use of a neutral territory - somewhere other than your bunnies normal space.

The new bunny will live in a separate, temporary pen. This pen can be smaller than would normally be acceptable, because it is temporary. It should be located next to your bunnies pen, so they become accustomed to each others presence. After several days, you can switch their litter boxes, so they become even more familiar with each others scent.

Their first direct interactions with one another should be in a neutral space; so, do not use the space in which your bunny exercises and plays. Set up a temporary enclosure in another room, or use a relatively small room (e.g., a bathroom) that doesn’t have a lot of distractions for them. You want them to pay attention to one another, not all the things in their new environment. You will need to supervise their entire time together, until you are comfortable with them being on their own for short periods. Observe them carefully and learn their body language. You can not observe them carefully if your mind is occupied with other activity, even when you are nearby. Use this as a time to get to know your bunnies as they develop their relationship. Remember that a fight can occur even after they have been accepting of one another, and each fight sets them back a bit, so don’t leave them unsupervised too soon.

Give them supervised time together in the neutral space every day. At first, the amount of time together might be short before they are not getting along. That’s fine. Just keep working with them once or twice a day.

Rabbits reactions to one another are very much variable during the bonding process. Here are a few key points to keep in mind:

• Some amount of pawing, chasing and humping is normal.

• In general, let them work things out as much as possible. Intervene when one is chasing or humping to the point of being a pest to the other.

• You can calm them by gently petting each one (at the same time.) Pet them when the bunnies are next to each other, to calm them. Do not, however, place on next to the other; that will be stressful for them.

• A fight can happen very quickly. They will spin around, frequently on their sides kicking each other with their powerful hind legs. They can bite one another. You break up the fight by distracting and/or frightening them so that they stop or slow down to the point that you can pick one up. Methods of distraction include: 1) making loud sounds; 2) spraying water on them; 3) toss a towel over them. If this type of fight occurs, put them back in their separate pens and don’t try again for several hours, or until the next day.

• Be very careful when separating rabbits who are fighting or even humping. If one rabbit is biting the other and you pull it away, it may hang on as you do so and tear the skin. Rather, take hold of the rabbit and wait a few seconds for it to let go. If it doesn’t, gently put a finger under its chin to induce it to let go.

• A rabbit who is about to start a fight will frequently put its ears back and/or its tail up. If you see this, you can distract him or pick him up, as a preventative measure.
It’s not uncommon that aggression, chasing or humping becomes more prevalent after the first several days or week. Don’t be discouraged by this. Patience is one of your most effective tools.

You can incorporate car rides into the process whenever you like. A twenty minute ride around the neighborhood (so there is plenty of stopping, starting and turning) can accelerate the process of bonding. Give them time together in the house when you return from the ride.

Once they are relatively comfortable with one another, move their interactions into the exercise/play area used by your bunny. This is the first step into non-neutral territory. Do not give them access to the entire room or their pens when they are together. Rather, set up a temporary enclosure in the room. Put them in this area together and continue to work with them as you have been doing.

Once they are comfortable in this area, move the enclosure so that it includes their pens. Many rabbits won’t like it if another rabbit enters their pen, so keep their pens closed at first. After a few sessions, open the pens and let them explore each other’s pen. Watch them carefully when they do and be prepared to stop any fights that might happen. The next step is to remove the enclosure and let them have the entire room together, as your bunny had in the past.

Eventually they will become very accepting of one another. They will be frequently lay side by side, touching. One or both may groom the other. Pawing, chasing and humping will diminish. You’ll be comfortable with them being together. At this point, you can remove the temporary pen and they can commence living together.

We Can Bond Them For You

The time and space commitment required to bond two rabbits can be difficult for some people. We can bond your rabbits for you. They will reside in one of our volunteer's home (not the rescue center) for one week. Our volunteers who perform this service have extensive experience bonding rabbits. After you take them home, they will live together.

Prior to taking them home, you should thoroughly clean the pen, litter box and rooms to which they will have access. You want to remove all traces of your bunnies scent, so that he or she doesn’t become territorial with his or her new companion. In some cases, we will recommend that they have a temporary pen in a different location (i.e. not the location of your bunnies pen) for a while; again, this is avoid your bunny becoming territorial.

When Bonded Bunnies Bicker

Sometimes rabbits that have been bonded begin to act aggressively towards one or the other. If that happens, here are some things to consider as causes:

• Have there been any changes in the environment? Changes in location of their pen can be stressful. Likewise, a change in the type of litter used can disturb them. New carpeting or furniture, for example, can introduce new smells that can be upsetting.

• Are there other animals around, especially ones new to the house? This can be quite stressful for the rabbits. If this is the case, restrict the new animal’s access to the pen until the rabbits become accustomed to its presence.
• Have there been any changes in their routine? Have they been getting less time outside the pen? In any event, give them more time outside the pen for play and exercise.

• Perhaps one or both are bored. Give them new and different toys.

• Do they have a hidy house? Many rabbits seem to need a private place every once in a while.

• One of the rabbits could be ill or injured. Be especially observant for signs of illness and give your bunnies a check for injuries.

• Their pen may be too small, even if they’ve been in it for a while. Consider making it larger.

If one of the situations above applies, try to correct or “undo” the change. Use the calming techniques described in the prior section to help your bunnies through. If the aggression is severe, you many need to separate them and repeat the bonding process (this is rare.)

Information about pens, hidy houses, toys and quick checks for injuries can be found on our website.