

# Introducing your Rabbits

Owner information sheet





Rabbits are very sociable animals, but whilst they benefit from companionship, they are also very territorial. This means that any new rabbits in the household must be introduced to any resident rabbits slowly and in a neutral environment. Additionally, before you consider introducing your rabbit to a new friend, you should ensure that your existing rabbit is fit, healthy and not showing any signs of disease. We would also advise neutering both rabbits prior to introductions; even if you are introducing two rabbits of the same sex. If they are not neutered, fluctuations in their hormones can cause future issues. We always advise that rabbits need the company of other rabbits. Humans cannot replicate the interaction a rabbit has with another rabbit. Despite the popular belief, rabbits also cannot cohabit with guinea pigs; they have very different needs in terms of housing, nutrition and also differing ways of communicating.

### BONDING PROCESS

1. House the rabbits separately initially. Prior to bonding sessions, make sure you have plenty of time as supervision is crucial during the bonding process.
2. With either rabbit in their own run, place the runs close to each other but without the rabbits being able to physically get to each other. Ensure both rabbits have hiding places in their run, so they have a safe place if they feel stressed. This will allow them to become familiar with each other by seeing and smelling each other, but safely.
3. Exchange items in either run to swap scents between them. For example, swap tunnels between the two runs. You can also gently rub a cloth on one rabbit, then doing so to the other to transfer their scent.
4. Constantly monitor the behaviour of both rabbits and look for signs of stress. For example, if you see aggression or either rabbit hiding, do not move on to next steps. If both rabbits are relaxed and eating and even lying down near to each other through the runs, these are signs they are becoming more comfortable. If the rabbits are showing social and relaxed behaviours, you can start to move the runs closer together gradually. This stage may take a few days or more – it is very important to not rush this stage and supervise the rabbits sufficiently before moving to the next stage.
5. Once you have completed the above steps and the rabbits are showing positive behaviours, it is time to prepare a neutral area in order to introduce the rabbits face to face. This step is of course where if the rabbits begin fighting, they may seriously injure each other so it is vital you only begin this stage when you have plenty of time, the correct set up and have followed all steps.
6. Identify a neutral area where neither rabbit lives or has been before. Choose an area where the rabbits will have space from each other, but also not so much space they would never see each other. This may be a large run or quiet indoor room.
7. Place new (or just cleaned) resources into the area. This should include some hiding spaces, multiple litter trays, multiple water bowls and multiple piles of hay. Providing choice and easy access to key resources will reduce the potential for conflict or resource guarding. Ensure any hiding places are open – for example open ended boxes



and beds – this reduces the risk of either rabbit defending what they see as their resource or one rabbit becoming cornered. Have some thick gloves to hand in case you do need to support the rabbits and separate them.

8. Place either rabbit in the enclosed space, not directly next to each other. Initially there may not be an obvious reaction but continue to monitor as they explore the area. You can also scatter some tasty food throughout the run in order to give them something positive to do whilst spending time near to each other. However if either rabbit becomes defensive of the tastier food, this may need to be removed and this step delayed until further down the bonding process. Similarly, if one rabbit does guard any item, consider removing these items, but always ensure there is sufficient access to hay (in multiple separate piles) and water (through separate water bowls).
9. The length of these sessions should be influenced on how the rabbits react. It may be only a few minutes initially, especially if you have any concerns. Never leave the rabbits unattended during these sessions and if you run out of time, separate the rabbits back into their own enclosures. If the session was entirely positive, you could extend the length of time for the next session.
10. Once they are spending a couple of hours together without issue in the neutral area, you can look to introduce them into shared accommodation. If you do not have new accommodation, ensure the accommodation and resources are thoroughly cleaned. Ensure the shared run is a different space than either rabbit has used before, such as new grass / paving. Ensure you continue to monitor their behaviour closely once they first live together, particularly as the change in environment can damage their new relationship and you may see a regression from the initial introduction area.

#### POSITIVE BEHAVIOURS

- Showing typical signs of being relaxed and sharing space without appearing stressed
- Seeking each other out whilst showing positive behaviours
- Grooming each other
- Grooming is a sign that rabbits are feeling comfortable with each other and is something rabbits will often do together. However, depending on the individual relationship, both rabbits may groom each other, one rabbit may groom another more, or they might not groom each other at all.
- Resting and sleeping next to each other
- Eating close to each other

#### CONCERNING BEHAVIOURS

There are some behaviours which may look worrisome but can actually be within normal repertoire of rabbit behaviour during bonding, at low levels. For example, circling, chasing, mouthing and gentle fur pulling or nipping. However, if one or both rabbits become particularly stressed, shows these behaviours particularly excessively or relentlessly, or you think this may escalate to aggression, it would be time to intervene. For example:

- Excessive fur pulling
- Excessive mounting
- Boxing (standing up on back legs and boxing with front legs)
- Flattening ears and grunting, charging
- Biting resulting in screaming
- Continuous circling or chasing



If you see these behaviours, wear your gloves to gently separate the rabbits. If both rabbits relax a little, you may be able to continue the session. Otherwise, separate the rabbits and set up another introduction meeting at a later time.

#### THE FUTURE

Rabbit relationships can be fragile and changes in their environment or situations can lead to issues between the rabbits. This includes changing their enclosure, introducing new high value items (such as food), or being separated for activities such as a vet trip. Keep your rabbits together, even if only one needs to go to the vets. Continually monitor your rabbit's behaviour both as an individual and also as a pair or group, for any signs of distress. As their relationship becomes stronger over time, changing their enclosure should hopefully not damage their relationship.

If you encounter issues with the bonding process, we recommend contacting an Animal Behaviour Training Council practitioner who covers rabbits. We recommend maintaining pet insurance for your rabbit and advise you to check your policy to see if it covers behaviour referrals.