



# The Most Important Word in Bonding: P-A-T-I-E-N-C-E!

By Mary Cotter

*Ed. note: Mary Cotter serves as vice president of the international House Rabbit Society, and is the founder of Rabbit Rescue & Rehab, the NYC licensed chapter of HRS. She has been bonding*

*rabbits since 1988, when, after living with a single rabbit for six years, she rescued and bonded her first pair. Since that time, she has taught many volunteers and rabbit caretakers to bond rabbits*

*using methods that avoid the use of force and that minimize stress, and she offers these tips to give rabbit owners a better understanding of the process.*

- P**ick partners carefully.
- A**bandon all expectations.
- T**ime sessions religiously.
- I**nteraction does not equal proximity.
- E**valuate interactions frequently.
- N**eutral territory matters!
- C**autious rather than risk!
- E**nd sessions promptly.

**PICK** potential partner rabbits carefully. There is tremendous variability in how rabbits get along with each other upon first meeting. A few seem to genuinely like each other and seek out each other's

company; many seem to “squabble” and bicker until it becomes clear that the other rabbit is not a threat; and a few seem to want to demolish each other. Many people, out of ignorance, make the mistake of acquiring baby rabbits who get along just fine – at first, because they are juveniles, and subsequently because male/female pairs want to breed. Once the rabbits reach sexual maturity and are spayed/neutered, however, things may change. The smoothest bondings are typically those in which the rabbits have meaningful input in the process. The rabbit caretaker's choice of a partner rabbit (based on size, breed, color, etc.) may differ dramatically from the rabbit's

own choice, and attempts to force a rabbit to accept another rabbit may end sadly. In the early nineties, when I joined the first rabbit Internet listservs, I was struck by how many humans seemed to be trying to “threaten” rabbits into a bond. I remember one rescuer in particular who claimed to be able to bond any pair of rabbits, regardless of whether they “liked” each other. This was very impressive to me, until I learned how many bondings created this way subsequently fell apart. Pick the rabbit who gets along best with your own rabbit; you will have a much easier time, *(Continued on page 2)*

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and you will increase the chances for a solid, long-term bond.

**ABANDON** all expectations.

Owner expectations of how a bonding “should” proceed are almost always different from how it actually does proceed, and attempting to force rabbits to live up to expectations almost always leads to disappointment.

Some years ago, an owner complained that her rabbits “just weren’t bonding,” although they had lived together peacefully for many months. She was not aware that some bonds seem to be “love” bonds, with constant mutual grooming, while others may seem more “platonic.” Either type of bond is just fine; let the rabbits decide the degree of closeness that works for them, and accept their decision without pressuring them toward further “closeness.”

That said, when rabbits are housed in side-by-side cages or puppy exercise pens (as they are in many rescue situations, because those of us who foster often have little choice), the initial arousal caused by being so close to an unfamiliar rabbit often gradually gives way to indifference toward, or even acceptance of, the presence of another rabbit. I shared this information with our early volunteers, and we began to use this setup as a first step toward producing a peaceful bond. Rabbits who are given the opportunity to live peacefully near another rabbit, and who can see, hear and smell the other rabbit, are subsequently much easier to introduce outside their cages.

A note about “living peacefully”: pens or cages should be placed side-by-side with enough space between them (usually around 3 inches) so that the rabbits cannot press their noses through the spaces between the bars to touch (or bite!) each other. If necessary, place an object (such as a water bottle on its side) between the pens, to prevent the rabbits

Illustrations: Michelle Nunnelly



from pushing the pens closer. If one rabbit is getting out-of-cage exercise time, it should be in an area well away from the other rabbit’s pen. These two considerations are key to keeping the peace.

Occasionally, rabbits will bond on their own without any special efforts on the part of their humans. In one instance, a fosterer housed two unrelated female rabbits in an extra bedroom for almost a year, and reported that she was getting the feeling that these rabbits “liked” each other, although they had never been introduced. She was right: we introduced those rabbits and they bonded immediately. Was this “love at first sight”? Or was it the long-term effect of living peacefully in the same room? Hard to tell, and we may never know. But it certainly was not anyone’s expectation!

**TIME** all bonding sessions religiously. In their eagerness to get the job done, many rabbit caretakers unknowingly slow down the bonding process by pushing for too much, too soon. Resist the temptation to extend bonding sessions “because the rabbits are doing so well!”

The best bonding sessions are short, and *always* end on a successful note. Set a timer for one minute at first, and separate the rabbits after that time, ***no matter what they are doing.*** Several very short, very peaceful bonding sessions per day will go much farther in

creating a solid bond than longer sessions where the rabbits become hostile toward one another and need to be separated. After several, peaceful, one-minute sessions, increase the time to 90 seconds, and then two minutes. As you continue with bonding sessions, you will develop a good sense of how long the rabbits can be together successfully. As long as you do not exceed this time, you will not lose ground.

It is much easier to be patient if you remind yourself that a single incident of significant rabbit-to-rabbit aggression

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caused by owner impatience can set the whole process back days or weeks...or in some instances, months.

**INTERACTION** does not equal physical proximity. Interaction is *anything the rabbits do* while in the same space with another rabbit.

Physical proximity is not the sole, or even the most important, criterion, for “interaction.” In other words, rabbits can be interacting regardless of whether they are physically close to each other. A rabbit who systematically moves to increase distance from another rabbit is interacting in a very clear way that should be respected.

Think of the New York City subway system: if, say, a woman enters a subway car at night where there is only one other rider – a man, sitting by himself, the woman is likely to choose a seat on the other end of the car from the man. Her choosing that distance is not a failure to interact; it *is* an interaction.

In nature, rabbits have virtually unlimited space to use as part of their communication when they meet other rabbits, but when we introduce them in our homes, the space we offer them is typically much more limited, so their ability to communicate using space (creating distance) may be impaired.

Nevertheless, when bonding rabbits in a limited space, many rabbit caretakers worry that the rabbits are “not interacting” when they choose to stay distant from one another, and these caretakers repeatedly move the rabbits closer in a misguided effort to “get them to bond.”

**EVALUATE** interactions frequently during each session. Do not let the rabbits’ apparently compatible behavior at the outset lull you into complacency. Things can change quickly, and a session that started out peacefully can turn sour with one backwards hump or head-to-tail chase! If you are not thoroughly familiar with normal rabbit behavior,

Illustration: Michelle Nunnally



ask someone who is to help you evaluate what you are observing.

**NEUTRAL** territory matters! Introducing rabbits in “neutral territory” can make a big difference in their ability to get along. If either rabbit “owns” the territory, the bonding process can be significantly more difficult, since the “owner-rabbit” will almost always want to remove the other rabbit from his/her turf, by whatever means possible. If your own rabbit is free-range and “owns” the whole house, consider doing the introduction and bonding in the basement or in a friend’s home. In apartment buildings that have carpeted hallways and friendly neighbors, it is often possible to use a public hallway for short periods of time. The bottom line: doing your best to find a space that is not “owned” by either rabbit will make the bonding process easier on both you and the rabbits.

**CAUTION** rather than risk! Serious, but completely avoidable, injuries have occurred during the bonding process simply because the humans involved took unnecessary risks. Have a friend or assistant help you with the bonding, if possible, and intervene swiftly and skillfully to prevent any sort of aggressive or dangerous behavior (e.g., lunging, ears laid back, head-to-tail circular chasing, jumping directly over the other rabbit, backwards mounting). Wearing a pair of soft-soled shoes or potholder

mitts on your hands will allow you to intervene safely and will prevent injury both to you and to the rabbits. Simply plunge your protected hands into any sudden fray or unexpected confrontation between the rabbits, in a manner that allows them to redirect their aggression onto your hands. If necessary, you can firmly and snugly “straddle” one rabbit’s body with your protected hands, while a friend or assistant removes the other rabbit, or blocks off his access to your rabbit.

If you are fairly new to rabbits, and are not sure what a particular behavioral display means, or if you even think one rabbit is becoming agitated or exhibiting aggressive behavior toward the other, err on the side of caution and separate the rabbits. If you wonder if the bonding session has gone on too long, err on the side of caution and terminate the session. Exercising caution may mean the bonding process will take a bit longer, but the process will be safer and more peaceful for both you and the rabbits.

**END** encounters promptly, and end on a successful note; do not be tempted to extend bonding sessions early on, simply because you feel that “the rabbits are doing so well!” Bondings are almost always much easier and more peaceful when they are short and frequent. Failure to end a session after a short time can lead to escalating stress, arousal and aggression on the part of the rabbits.

# Have We Got a Girl (or Boy) for You!

By Amy Odum

So, Bun-bun has it all, or nearly—a happy home, the run of the place (mostly), plenty of yummy veggies, the odd box or phonebook to demolish if he’s feeling feisty, and the unconditional devotion of his human companions. The only thing lacking is a little bunny honey to share it all with. What do you do next?

The worst possible thing you can do is pick out a rabbit for your bunny, bring him or her home, put them together and expect love to bloom. Most likely the fur will fly! There is a much better chance of eventually having a happily bonded pair if Bun gets to choose his own new friend. When we’re contacted by people who are interested in finding a partner bunny, we schedule what we like to call “bunny speed-dating” sessions. They bring their rabbit to the shelter for one-on-one introductions in neutral space with several potential partners.

## THE BIG DAY

It’s not always possible to guess your bunny’s “type,” no matter how well you know him. A mellow, laid-back bunny may decide to assert himself when presented with another rabbit, or a bossy bunny may become uncharacteristically shy. The best thing to do is try several candidates and see what happens.

The bunnies must be introduced in a safe, neutral area. At the shelter, we use two puppy exercise pens linked together to form a big “corral” for the bunnies. It’s small enough for the humans supervising the action to keep an eye on the participants, but large enough for the rabbits to put a little distance between them if they feel stressed.

Each bunny is put in the enclosure and given a few minutes to explore and get used to the space. Once they’ve each had a chance to do this, they’re put in the pen at the same time, at opposite ends of the enclosure. Joining them in the space is one of the volunteers, standing by to intervene if either becomes aggressive.

## WHAT TO EXPECT

A lot can be revealed in just the first few seconds, especially if the reaction is negative. Instant aggression by one or both parties is obvious and calls for swift intervention—the bunnies are immediately scooped up out of harm’s way and that particular candidate is checked off the list.

Sometimes, if we’re very, very lucky, it’s instant attraction: no aggression or fear, beyond a little excited apprehension, and both bunnies seem to hit it off right away. There may even be a little tentative grooming on the very first “date.” These pairs are meant to be, and usually just one or two bonding sessions at home—just to make sure a little territorialism by the resident bunny doesn’t surface, once back on his or her own turf—are all that is needed before the happy couple can live together full-time.

Most reactions are between the two extremes, and reading the signs is a lesson in bunny body language. The rabbits are attempting to work out their dominance issues—who’s going to be the “alpha bunny” and who’ll be the follower. (It’s worth noting that age, gender and size are usually irrelevant as far as the bunnies are concerned.)

**Keeping their distance.** It may look like they’re ignoring each other, but each is very much aware of the other. This seemingly neutral reaction is actually positive—if they wanted to fight, they would. It may not be love at first sight, but it’s peaceful.

**Chasing.** A question of degree. Truly relentless pursuit may mean an unworkable match, but there’s chasing and then there’s chasing. Are the ears back, flattened against the body, or raised? Is the chaser truly aggressive, or is he just trying to keep up, to get closer to a reluctant or more cautious partner? Sometimes it’s the “chasee” who’s actually in control—keeping a comfortable distance, a little space between himself and a slightly too ardent admirer. Does the pursuer chase just enough to make the other bunny run away, and then stop pursuit? He’s making a statement, just showing who’s boss.

**Mounting.** First-time owners of single rabbits are often surprised to see altered rabbits mount each other, especially if it’s the female doing the mounting. This, too, is about dominance, not about making baby bunnies. Like chasing, it’s a question of degree. If both rabbits are fairly tolerant of the activity and there’s no dispute about who’s on top, figuratively as well as literally, this may be a match that will work.

**Sniff and run.** One or both bunnies may get close enough for a quick nose-to-nose sniff and then retreat. This is a clear sign of interest, especially if it’s well received by the other rabbit (no nose nips!).

**Ignoring each other.** Sometimes the two will sit within a few feet, even inches, of each other and appear to be completely oblivious. One or both may even turn their back on the other. This is a very good sign. They’re definitely interested, but not quite ready to try a more direct approach. Still sorting out those pesky dominance issues!

What we’re looking for is consistency. If there’s a pattern to their interactions—if there’s already an indication of how the dominance roles are likely to play out—then it’s likely that with time and patience the two will successfully and happily bond.

We love our bunnies, but for most creatures there’s nothing quite like the companionship of their own species. Anyone who’s ever lived with a bonded pair knows first-hand how intensely attached these little couples become, and once you’ve lived with a happily bonded pair, you’ll find yourself reluctant to ever keep a bunny as a single again.

If you have a bachelor (or bachelorette) bunny and would like to meet potential partners, please contact Cindy Stutts ([bygolyoly@att.net](mailto:bygolyoly@att.net)) in NYC or Nancy Schreiber ([nschreibmd@aol.com](mailto:nschreibmd@aol.com)) on Long Island. 🐰

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## BONDING

# Bunny Has Picked Out a Mate: Now What?



Austin and Confetti Castellano demonstrate that when it comes to bonding, size doesn't matter.

By Mary Ann Maier

Rabbits are social creatures and they can benefit from living in pairs. Despite this desire for companionship, however, you can't simply put them together and expect them to get along. There is a recommended process, called "bonding."

Bonding can be difficult, so it is best to allow rabbits to choose their mates. We arrange for rabbits to meet potential companions at the Long Island Rabbit Rescue Group or at the Manhattan AC&C shelter. We assess how they get along and guide adopters through the process. (Please see "Looking for Love" on the facing page for what happens during these introductions.)

You'll need to have your bonding area prepared when you bring your bunny and her new pal home. Set up side-by-side cages with precisely three inches of space between—no touching. Never allow them to touch noses through the bars before they are bonded. Don't allow one to exercise in the room where the other is confined. Fights may break out, and damage (physical and emotional) can occur.

Conduct one or two bonding "sessions" daily in a neutral area where neither bunny spends time. Block off furniture they might hide (or fight) under. Provide a rug for traction, plus two litter pans filled with hay. Don't use their regular litter pans; get new ones.

Place the bunnies in this bonding area. Put sneakers on your hands because you may have to plunge in to stop a fight. Now observe. Watch body language for dominance, fear or indifference.

Look for positive signs, too: eating or washing in one another's presence, lying down, or turning one's back. These all are indications they are getting comfortable with each other.

These bonding sessions are conducted for two minutes—and only two minutes—for at least the first week. Have patience. The object is to build up many peaceful, short sessions rather than to push too fast for longer sessions.

We help bunny parents identify certain behaviors that may be a prelude to fighting. Knowing when to intervene, and when not to, is key because it allows the bunnies to safely perform courtship behaviors, demonstrating to each other that they can be trusted.

When not in these sessions, the rabbits continue bonding in their respective cages. Don't feel bad about confining them. They are highly interested in being near their new neighbor, and aren't bored. You can help further by switching their litter pans, or even switching the rabbits themselves into each other's cage.

It's a joy to watch two bonded rabbits snuggling together, and it's comforting to know they have each other when we're at work. However, bonding is challenging. It's not for everybody, and it's not for every bunny. If you are interested in learning more, please contact us. If you are interested in instant gratification, also contact us: to adopt an already-bonded pair! 🐰

—Mary Ann Maier, a House Rabbit Society educator who works with the Long Island Rabbit Rescue Group, can be reached at [altitude8@yahoo.com](mailto:altitude8@yahoo.com).



From top, Snoopy and Radish on a speed date; pen setup; Bella and Jerry touch noses; Snoopy and Radish share a bowl; Beezle and Bloop recline together.