

Interpreting Behaviours

Observing these behaviours can give an insight to how the bonding is progressing

Bunny sitting still or hunched down:

- Bunny may be feeling out of their comfort zone and need to acclimatize to the environment.
- When hunched, bunnies will have a comfort circle usually 8-10cm diameter ring around them. Anything that breaches this region will enact a reaction. Reactions may be simply turning the head to face the breacher, through to lunging or biting. The reaction severity determines if the bonding should be stopped.

Exploring or chinning the enclosure:

- Feeling confident enough to explore the environment

Face the other bunny head to head and place his/her head under the other bunnies head:

- A social request for interaction.
- Other bunny may feel intruded on, note the recipients behavior closely for aggression. Be prepared to intervene.

Mounting:

- Arousal, excitement or poor prior socialization. Persistent mounting causes stress on the recipient and may mean bunny is not suitable for bonding

Interpreting Behaviours cont.

Lunging when other bunny comes near:

- Bunnies approached when they don't want to be can react like this. Stop the bonding session there as bunny is not in the mood. If behaviour persists then bunny doesn't want that friend.

Grooming self:

- Bunny is comfortable with those in its surroundings enough to take its eyes off them by presenting its vulnerability. Shows some trust.

Grooming the other bunny:

- Affectionate and comforting act.
- Some bunnies will lick at ears and eyes because they like the salt present on the skin and around the eyes. May or may not become a problem based on how the recipient reacts and how rough the licking bunny is.

Chasing:

- Can signify excitement, play or aggression so it is sometimes difficult to determine the underlying drive. If it results in fighting then aggression is likely. If it is a juvenile animal then it is likely excitement and play.

Flopping:

- A very good sign of comfort, relaxation and contentment with the other bunny.

The PAWS Bunny Bonding Program

All you need to know



Little
PAWS *Rescue*
Perth

The Initial Meet

If you are not sure whether your bunny wants a friend it is recommended you read the Little PAWS Rescue Rabbit Enrichment pamphlet. Not every bunny wants a bunny friend. Bunnies have a range of preferences on how they want to spend their time. Having a companion is not in every bunnies preferences.

The first time the bunnies meet will be at PAWS, they will be both placed in the neutral territory (a playpen setup in area neither bunny has been prior) with an experienced member of PAWS with them in the enclosure supervising.

Both bunnies may exhibit a range of behaviours which will be interpreted to determine how they are feeling and give a hint at how they may react to the other bunny.

The initial meet is the most dangerous period for bunny bonding. Serious injuries may occur which include facial (lip, ear and eye) injuries, deep bites to limbs and abdomen. Roughly one in every two hundred and fifty initial bonds (0.4%) will result in an injury occurring requiring a vet visit. This is important to understand as you will be financially required to cover for any injuries that occur to your own animal. Little PAWS Rescue accepts the financial responsibility for any injury that occurs on its own animals during bonding.

Little PAWS staff are experienced, capable and can ensure that all that can be done to prevent injury is done. It is important to understand that the PAWS member may end a bond immediately if they feel there is a risk of injury.

If both bunnies are behaving well and a trial is desired then a 30 day bonding trial can be commenced which you will continue at your home with the two bunnies.

Stage 1: Direct Supervision

Now that you have both bunnies at home it is time to set them up in their **separate** enclosures. The further apart the better. Bunnies will establish a border of territory around their enclosure and may react negatively to any who encroach on 'their land'.

Do not commence bonding until the new bunny has at least had a day or two to settle in to the new household (sounds, smells and routines).

The Neutral Territory:

Setup the provided play pen in a region of the house that is away from either bunny's current enclosure. In the first stage of home bonding keep it as plain as possible. If your own bunny has been in this area before it is recommended to clean and vacuum the area to decrease the animals scent present there.

Bonding Sessions:

Assess each bunny before attempting a bonding session to make sure they are both nice and relaxed. Carefully collect them and place them into the neutral territory and sit with them. You may want a towel on your lap (in case you need it to wrap a bunny if it starts to fight) and some tissues in your pocket (in case a bunny leaves a territorial wee on the ground).

Aim to sit with them for 15-20 minutes, monitor the exhibited behaviours and use this information to build an overall picture of how they tend to behave together. If after 20 or so minutes they are behaving very well you can leave the playpen but must stay in the room to supervise them. If you need to leave the room, separate them.

Continue stage 1 bonding daily until you are comfortable that you can leave the room and they won't fight.

Stage 2: Indirect Supervision

At this stage you have completed several bonding sessions under direct supervision and are now comfortable that they will behave themselves when being watched. Now it is time to see how they behave when not under direct supervision. Set them up as before in the neutral territory, sit with them for a few minutes to make sure they are behaving well. Now leave the room (leave the door open) so you can hear if they have a scuffle in the playpen. If you need to go outside or leave you will need to separate them. Do this for as long as it takes for you to trust them not to fight if you are not around.

Stage 3: Permanent Home

This is the time to set them up in what will become their permanent home. Bonding can fail here because bunnies at this stage will get along in a neutral territory but if they have their familiar castle, favourite toy or food bowl they may aggressively guard it when the other bunny approaches it. First, setup their new area to be as neutral as possible, clean and vacuum. Place temporary items (cardboard boxes instead of their own castles, temporary towels and blankets instead of their own cushions etc) clean litter trays very well to eliminate the original bunny's scent. It is recommended in the initial period to have 2 litter trays, 2 food bowls and 2 water sources. These 'resources' can be of high value to a bunny and may be guarded.

Once prepared, place both bunnies inside and watch them for 10-15min, make a plan to be home for the day and be around to listen out for any scuffles. Hopefully the bond they formed in stage 1 and 2 holds when they are transferred to the new home. Over the next few weeks, their own items can be gradually re-introduced once well cleaned. Hopefully they come to regard these items now as shared