Standard Operating Procedure

Bonding Rabbits

Last Updated: January 25th, 2023

Defining bonded rabbits: Two rabbits who are emotionally connected and help each other navigate the world physically and emotionally. Rabbit behaviorists recommend keeping rabbits in bonded pairs for quality of life.

When to bond rabbits:

1. At the request of an adopter to free up cage space in a crowded shelter.
2. When there is adequate staffing or volunteers to safely coordinate and oversee the full bonding process.

When NOT to bond rabbits: Bonded pairs often take longer to adopt and the bonding process requires time and an extensive understanding of rabbit behavior.

1. Do NOT bond or initiate play dates between rabbits unless requested by a committed adopter.
2. Do NOT bond or initiate play dates between rabbits if it will increase length of stay.
3. Do NOT bond or initiate play dates between rabbits unless there is sufficient staffing or volunteers to coordinate and oversee the process.

Bonding process:

1. <u>Supervisor:</u>
    a. Dates will be coordinated and scheduled with one designated date supervisor. The date supervisor must have previous experience with the bonding process and can be either staff or volunteer.
    b. The date supervisor is like a playground monitor. Their role is to:
        i. Protect the daters from bites.
        ii. Monitor, but minimize your own or others interaction with the bunnies.
        iii. Interrupt prohibited behaviors.
        iv. Offer nose rubs during “a present for a pet.” If accepted, use brief pets to calm stiff tails.
        v. Increase or decrease the size of the dating area as needed.

**Adapted from BUNS’ bunny bonding protocol.*

2. Space: Rabbits are territorial, so the date must be held in neutral territory. The size of the dating pen can also be important. In nature, rabbits meet in unfenced space and have a lot of control over the distance from the other bunny. People tend to bond in smaller spaces to speed the process. But the smaller the space, the less ability the rabbits have to control the distance from the other bunny. I want a space in which I can end a fight quickly for the first meeting, but otherwise favor a larger rather than smaller pen.

3. Step-by-step:
    a. *Date 1*: The first date is an opportunity to observe how the rabbits behave with each other. I start on the ground between the two bunnies. Any aggression ends the date and we offer another candidate for the bond. If there is no aggression, then you can monitor the interaction. Interrupt forbidden behaviors. Allow positive behaviors. If you there are a lot of positive behaviors, try standing. End the date within 15 minutes and when the behaviors are positive.
    b. *Date 2*: The second date should always start at least one step back from where the first date ended. So most second dates will start with the person standing between the rabbits. Once the person sees consistent rabbit behavior from the Positive Behavior list, they should move to standing to one side. Most second dates end with the person standing to one side. But can end with the person outside the dating pen and watching. End while behaviors are positive. The second date can be up to 30 minutes
    c. *Date 3*: The third date starts with the person in the middle, with the goal of standing to one side after a consistent display of positive behavior. At the end of the third date, the person should be standing outside the pen, but watching the rabbits keenly and prepared to intervene. This is the test of whether the rabbits will refrain from forbidden behaviors when alone in the pen. End while behaviors are positive. The third date can be up to an hour.
    d. *Date 4*: The fourth date starts with the person in the pen, but standing to one side with the goal of standing outside the pen after a consistent display of positive behavior. After standing outside the pen for a while, begin to move away from the pen but still observing the rabbits. If all goes well begin to shift your gaze and attention from the rabbits. Perform other tasks if you like, but stay near the pen. Check the rabbits – frequently at first, and then at increasing intervals. The forth date should be several hours.

**Adapted from BUNS' bunny bonding protocol.*

e. *Continued dating*:
   i. Add dates as necessary if the rabbits need longer to bond.
   ii. House the rabbits separately but exercise them together.
f. *Once bonded:* Place both bunnies in their living quarters together. Observe until you are certain that the rabbits are comfortable together in a confined space.

4. Positive behaviors (*in general order of presentation*):
   a. Staying on opposite sides of the bonding space (Think 8th grade dance)
   b. Self grooming (a sign of non aggression)
   c. Laying in a relaxed posture (elongated vs huddled)
   d. Slow hopping in the bonding space.
      i. One bunny may hop closer to the other; the other will relocate
      ii. The distance the rabbits maintain between each other will decrease over time/several dates
   e. Sitting in close proximity to one another, but without contact
   f. Presenting for grooming (If grooming does not occur in one heartbeat, begin stroking the noses and foreheads of both bunnies – a rabbit that has politely requested grooming may become frustrated and nip the other rabbit)
   g. Sitting in contact with one another
   h. Physical contact
      i. Grooming
      ii. Consensual Mounting

5. Behaviors that may require more bonding time or modified strategies:
   a. Rapid approaches to another bunny can provoke flight or a nip
   b. Lip licking may indicate nervousness

   c. Some rabbits are not comfortable with the approach of a second rabbit; these rabbits do best with a bonding partner that will sit still and allow them to make all the approaches.
   d. Increasing the size of the bonding area can help in these situations.
   e. Some rabbits will remain stationary and decline to interact.
      i. In these cases you can decrease the size of the bonding area to bring them closer together.

**Adapted from BUNS' bunny bonding protocol.*

ii. Alternatively, you can try placing one bunny next to the other and showering pets on both rabbits as long as they voluntarily retain contact. Let them break contact if they wish. Give them some time and repeat.

6. Forbidden behaviors (interrupt immediately):
    a. Running past and close to the other rabbit (will often cause the second rabbit to turn its head and nip). Use your foot to block the run past and or the nip
    b. No chasing, including chasing in a tight circle. (very annoying to the rabbit being chased). Use your foot or body to block the chase
    c. No non consensual mounting. If necessary, detach the mounter and/or prevent him/her from chasing his/her intended.
    d. No backwards mounting (soft tissue next to sharp teeth) If the intended is calm and still, lift and rotate the mounter to the proper position.
    e. Stiff elevated tail, sometimes with ears back. This can be a sign that aggression is imminent. I block the approach to the other bunny and pet to change the emotions.
    f. No scuffling the ground and/or tossing twigs etc. (pre fight behavior: pet the scuffler and if that doesn't calm him/her pick the rabbit up and pet).
    g. No stiff-legged, rocking horse jumping (pre fight behavior. Pick up one of the rabbits immediately).
    h. No jumping over the other bunny. (pre fight behavior. Pick up one of the rabbits immediately)

Rabbits are officially bonded when:

1. They can spend 48 hours together without any chasing or aggressive behaviors.
2. Exceptionally positive signs of bonding include:
    a. Mutual grooming
    b. Sharing food
    c. Sleeping next to each other

Bonded rabbits MUST:

1. Stay together at all times
2. Be adopted together
3. Have a profile photo with their bonded partner displayed online

**Adapted from BUNS' bunny bonding protocol.*

Revision History

Date	Version	Description	Approved
1/18/23	1.0.0	Initial document created	RJ
1/25/23	1.0.1	Approved by S. Aguilar	SA

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