

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) in NYC or Nancy Schreiber (nschreibmd@aol.com) on Long Island. 🐰

—Amy Odum, a fosterer and a volunteer at Manhattan AC&C, can be reached at amy@adoptabunny.info.

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.



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.