



INTRODUCING RABBITS SAFELY

Rabbits are social animals and normally prefer to be with another rabbit. The company provided by another rabbit helps prevent abnormal behaviours and companionship enhances their life. However, if your rabbit has been kept alone it is important to ensure that the introduction is done sensitively.

Here are some tips on how to introduce rabbits for the first time

1. The best combinations are a neutered female and a neutered male
2. Initially introductions should be done on neutral territory. Females are usually very territorial so make sure it is well away from her living space.
3. For house rabbits you can use baby-gates between two separate rooms.
4. Initially the rabbits should be introduced at close proximity but with a barrier between them. Use something that allows them to see and smell each other but doesn't permit them to mix. A chicken wire fence is ideal.
5. Make sure that even when separated, they still have room to retreat. Baskets next to one another are not recommended as this can be too much too soon!
6. Do not rush things. Allow this type of low grade interaction for a few days.
7. Make sure that when they see one another, there are tasty food items or/ and engage them both in play with you and another helper at either side of the barrier. This will help them have positive associations with each other.
8. Observe responses. Lying at the barrier close to one another, curious behaviour like nose to nose sniffing and eating normally are all good signs.
9. if there doesn't appear to be any alarm or stress then you can progress to the next stage.
10. Make sure that they are still in a neutral territory and remove the barrier. Problems are more likely to arise if they feel cramped in together and don't have sufficient room to choose to retreat.
11. Provide lots of places to hide. Include piles of hay, boxes and other areas that they can go to.
12. Observe closely for signs of tension and aggression. Make sure a less confident rabbit isn't bullied by a more confident one.
13. For most rabbits, short introductions over time work better so have some patience. Start at 5 minutes, then 10 minutes and so on....
14. If you sense that at any time one of the rabbits is distressed, just separate as before (with the see through barrier) and take a few steps back. It may be just that they need a bit more time to adjust.
15. If they begin to fight, have a tray ready to slide between them to act as a barrier. Grabbing or chasing them will only add to the stress. However it is normal for there to be some running around together and pulling of hair so don't be too quick to interfere.
16. Remember that some rabbits never bond, especially if they have never been socialised with another. Sometimes a bad experience with another rabbit can cause an individual to have a negative association. In these cases you can provide your rabbit with company, train it (link to clicker training) and enhance its environment to provide an alternative source of mental enrichment.

For more information on rabbit behaviour visit: <https://www.rabbitwelfare.co.uk>

CAROLINE CLARK

Registered Veterinary Nurse, Cert. Ed. ABTC Registered Clinical Animal Behaviour Counsellor, APBC FULL Member Post Graduate Diploma in (AS) Companion Animal Behaviour Counselling.