



Introducing small pets to each other

Many of our small animal friends are incredibly social animals, living in the wild in large groups. Having a solitary animal can be very stressful for them; you're taking them out, spending time with them and love them dearly, but they don't have anyone around who speaks the same language. It gives them companionship when you're not around, and helps reduce stress and improve their health and happiness.

Whether you originally got one animal and now want to add a friend, or had a pair but one passed away, introducing a new companion can be tricky, but this guide is for you!

There are a few general rules to follow to help increase the chances of success:

- Go slow. Never toss one animal into another's cage and expect them to get along. While a lot of these animals are social, they are also territorial – how would you like it if someone was suddenly dropped in your room?
- If you want a pair of pets, get littermates that have been raised together.
- For larger pets like guinea pigs and rabbits, get them spayed or neutered. This really helps reduce hormones and decrease territorial attitudes (besides being healthier for them).

Gender is important.

For some animals, males are more territorial, for others, it's the females who have to defend their territory. Although you will get differences based on individual animal's personality, the basic rules are as follows:

Rabbits – Can live in male/male, female/female, or mixed pairs, but a male and female pair work best. This is one reason why fixing your pets is so important, as you do not want to put a female through the stress of continual pregnancies. Young, same sex pairs must also be fixed, as they can start to get territorial when they reach sexual maturity.

Guinea pigs – A neutered male and one or more females work best. Two females or two males can work, especially if one or both are a baby, but, depending on their personalities, there could eventually be some fighting.

Gerbils – One of the trickiest animals to introduce. Some people say that females get along better, others swear boys get along better. Declanning is the process where gerbils start fighting, and some can be reintroduced while some cannot. The exact reasons for this are not understood; in fact, the American Gerbil Society has an [online survey](#) you can fill out to help them understand the process better. Always keep an eye on your gerbils and look for any signs of fighting and immediately separate the victim, not the aggressor.

Rats – Probably one of the easiest animals to introduce to each other. Males can be the most territorial when introducing to each other, so take the process slowly. An older rat is usually more accepting of a younger rat than two of similar ages.

Dwarf hamsters – Same sexed pairings work best. They are very social animals and this will make sure that you don't have any litters of babies.

Sometimes, a friend is not needed.

Never try to force hamsters and hedgehogs to live with another. They are very solitary animals, they do not want a friend in their cage, and will fight until the intruder leaves. Young animals are okay with each other, but as they start to mature, they want to be alone – here at the store we're always keeping an eye on our cages and separating hamsters the moment they show any aggression.

Introduce them very slowly using these steps:

Step 1 - Place each animal in their cages in separate corners of the same room. They'll hear each other but do not get to meet. Every day, exchange handfuls of the bedding between the cages. Scent is very important to small animals, letting them know who is who. This will get them used to the idea that there is someone nearby. Do this for at least one week, although two weeks are better.

Step 2 - Place the cages next to each other. The animals still do not get to meet face to face, but this will allow them to see the each other. Continue to change handfuls of bedding between the two cages daily. Usually this stage is also done for one to two weeks, but don't continue to the next step if there seems to be any sign of aggression.

Step 3 - When the animals first meet, make it neutral territory, somewhere brand new to both of them – the bathtub is a great place to do this. One rabbit foster home likes to put two rabbits loose on the back seat of the car and go for a drive – use a neutral carrier for smaller animals. Being in a brand new space, they will be too afraid to be territorial, and will want to cuddle together for safety. Someone must stay with them, and have some towels ready in case there is some fighting. A water bottle can be a handy tool to distract them and stop fighting, as they dislike the water being sprayed on them and will eventually stop to clean themselves.

This is a great time to give them a bath. This will reduce their scent, making them smell more like each other, which can help reduce territorial instincts. They also usually don't like the process, so it gives them a good bonding opportunity.

Step 4 – While the animals are meeting each other, the largest cage needs to be totally cleaned out. Because they can be territorial, you want to eliminate any scent of the previous occupant. Use an enzymatic cleanser like Nature's Miracle to return the cage to a neutral condition. We recommend getting new hideys and toys, and rearrange the cage into a new layout, so that it feels like a brand new space.

Step 5 - After placing them in the cage, keep an eye on them for an hour or two. Watch them closely for the next week or so, checking each one for sore, bites or other signs of fighting. If there appears to be any fighting, separate them for a couple of days and then try reintroducing them.

Understand that some animals will not take to a companion, no matter how slowly you introduce them. In this case, you'll need to be prepared to have two separate cages and set ups. Never try to force two animals that do not like each other to live together; it's terribly stressful, and will lead to fighting and injuries.

One solution: if your pet does not take to their new companion, try getting them a stuffed friend! We have many customers who, when a companion guinea pig passes on, get a stuffed dog toy for the remaining cavy. You don't have to put them through the stress of introduction and they still feel like they have a friend who understands.