

Bonding Guinea Pigs

by Charity Dennington, Guinea Pig Slave Rescue Team

[NOTE: Before you begin please do your research and prepare properly. Don't just throw two piggies together and expect it to work out magically. Be patient. Make sure to set aside at least 4-6 hours for the whole process. You are trying to create a bond that lasts for the lives of your precious piggies. Finally, don't give up too soon. Read about normal Guinea pig behaviors so you know what to expect.]

Several months ago, I came up with the idea of combining my 2 trios of guinea pigs (All 6 of them were adopted from the Guinea Pig Slave Rescue). I had one group of three girls - a mother and 2 daughters - that were extremely sedentary. I thought if I put them with my active trio, which consisted of 2 females and 1 neutered male, they might get more exercise and be healthier. Before I combined them into a herd of 6 I did tons of research to give them the best possible chance of getting along. Even with all my preparation it was still a scary event, but I learned so much from it.

I left them all in a neutral space for 6 hours. The first hour was quite frightening because my smallest girl, Temple, was terrorizing the mother and her 2 daughters. I couldn't believe she was going after girls that weigh 3/4 of a pound more than her. I almost gave up, but my gut instinct told me to keep going. I gave everyone a bonding bath and it helped a bit. Things started to settle down. When I put them back in their newly cleaned huge cage the dramatics started back up, but at a lower level of intensity. During the first 48 hours I still wasn't sure if it was going to be a good fit long term. There was a lot of teeth chattering and rumblestrutting. It lasted through the 2nd week, but every day during that time was better than the one before. By the 3rd week they were getting along great. By the 4th week they were all doing better in the herd than they had been before the combining. It's actually been a beautiful thing to watch the relationships and trust develop among all of the piggies. And interestingly, the more they trust each other the closer they seem to me. As herd animals I think the security of numbers makes them feel more safe and at ease.

PREPARATION:

To give your Guinea pigs the best chance of getting along make sure that your cage is large enough. For two females a 2x4 C&C cage or Midwest works great. For males a 2x4 or Midwest is the minimum size, but a 2x5 is preferred as boars get along better when they have more space. Also, make sure you have at least one of everything per Guinea pig: water bottles, food bowls, and cuddle beds.

Prepare a neutral area for the introduction. I used my bathroom because it is next to the piggy room and has a safe, open space. Cover the floor with a Uhaul blanket or other absorbent layer topped off with a fleece blanket. Put a big pile of hay on the floor for the piggies to munch on and play in. I had 2 hay piles



since I had a large area with so many piggies. Make sure to have water bottles available during the introduction since it may last for 4-6 hours. I do not recommend the water bottle configuration shown in the following picture because my girls had so many confrontations around the corners of the grids. Next time I am going to find a way to put them up against the wall.

An hour or two into the introductions when the dramatics have settled down, clean the cage completely. Keep checking on the piggies though to make sure they are still doing well in the neutral space. Take everything out of the cage and wash down the chloroplast or canvas base and the grids with a mixture of 50% white vinegar and 50% water. Wash all fleece items in the washer with a 1/2 cup of vinegar. Clean all bowls and water bottles thoroughly. Everything in the cage should be as clean as if it were brand new. This will create a neutral space for the piggies to go back into. If the cage previously belonged to one piggy then put the items back in a different configuration. You want it to feel “new” to both piggies. That will go a long way in reducing fights over territory. Also, leave out all hides that only have one entrance. I only used cuddle beds for the first 48 hours after the introduction. Then I added back in tunnels and other hides that have 2 entrances. Later when you are confident that everyone is getting along you can add back any other hides you have.

FOUR TYPES OF PIGGY GROUPS:

1) 2 FEMALES (SOWS)

Females are usually fairly easy to bond. If you have a female that is extremely dominate it might work better to pair her with a very young Guinea pig.

2) 2 MALES (BOARS)

Boars have about a 20% chance of bonding with another specific boar. If you can find a rescue center they might let your piggy try out others to see which would be a good fit. The Guinea Pig Slave Rescue in Cabot, Arkansas does that and creates a lot of happy piggy friends. If you have an older boar it's sometimes easier to get them to accept a baby.

It's very rare to find 3 boys that can live in harmony. If you have 2 that like each other that's fantastic and I highly encourage you to not add any other piggies. Many times when people try to add a 3rd it permanently breaks the bond of the original 2. You could end up with 3 piggies that have to be in 3 separate cages.

3) 1 FEMALE & 1 NEUTERED MALE

Neutered Guinea pigs aren't very common, but this is one of the easiest pairings.

4) HERD (3 or more Guinea pigs)

You can put as many females together as you have cage space for as long as you don't have one that is super bossy that bullies the others. Most females actually prefer to be in groups of 3 or more.

Another option is to have one neutered male with a group of females. Never put more than one neutered male per herd though. 2 males will fight around females even if they are both neutered. I currently have 6 sows with my neutered boar and they all get along amazingly well.



BEHAVIORS:

Review the below Guinea pig behaviors before you start the introduction so you know what to expect.

Dominant behaviors are a normal part of the piggies sorting out their hierarchy and are to be expected during introductions:

- 1) Teethchattering - a little of this is no big deal
- 2) Mounting - both males and females do this (see picture below)
- 3) Yawning - to show off their big teeth
- 4) Rumblestrutting - walking around and shaking their butts while making a vibrating noise. This just says, "I'm the boss".
- 5) Hair pulling
- 6) Nipping
- 7) Chasing - a little of this is ok (picture below)
- 8) Chin raises - who ever raises their chin the highest wins
- 9) Circling - to smell each other's rear ends
- 10) Spraying urine - my females did this occasionally to the neutered male until he learned to stop sniffing their rear ends. (It didn't happen during the intro, but occurred several times during the first few weeks)

Aggressive behaviors are what you need to watch out for especially during the first hour of introductions. Don't leave the piggies alone during this time and have a towel handy to throw over any piggies that are fighting or about to start fighting. Watch your hands; they might bite you accidentally in their frenzy. An oven mitt can come in handy to separate two pigs.

- 1) Biting - if blood is flowing it's time to separate them
- 2) Chasing - a little bit of this is normal, but if one piggy is chasing another relentlessly for long periods of time then they are being a bully.
- 3) Blocking the other piggy from food or water
- 4) Kicking another piggy out of a bed, but then not even using the bed themselves.
- 5) Teethchattering - for an extended period of time



INTRODUCTION TIME:

Start with a bonding bath:

I have decided that from now on I am going to do a bonding bath EVERY time I introduce piggies. When my trios were introduced I had some aggressive behavior from one of my piggies. I decided to give everyone a bonding bath and it seemed to make a big difference. A few months later, when I introduced Billie, a 5 month old female, to my herd of 6 I wanted to make the intro as smooth as possible, so everyone got a bonding bath before being put into the neutral space.

For a bonding bath bathe only their rear ends with some guinea pig friendly shampoo to neutralize their smells. Piggies that smell alike are less likely to be aggressive. Towel dry and then blow dry on low to medium heat.

You can also use a bonding bath if you have 2 piggies that already live together and are starting to argue. In fact, I would recommend going through this whole intro procedure including the neutral space time and cage cleaning. This can sometimes save a relationship that is threatening to break down (often when puberty hits).

If you have more than 2 piggies, bathe the rear end of the newest one first and put it into the neutral space. Then bathe and put in the least dominate piggie from your existing group. Give those 2 piggies about 10 minutes alone. Then bathe and add you next least dominate piggie and wait an additional 10 minutes. Continue this pattern and make sure your most dominate piggie goes in last. This worked like a charm when I introduced Billie to the herd. It prevented her from being overwhelmed by meeting 6 strangers all at once.

Piggy Parent's Job:

Watch for aggressive behaviors and have your towel ready. Other than that you need to be very quiet. Do not interfere. Do not talk to your piggies or touch them. Leave them alone so that they can sort things out for themselves.

About an hour after they have settled down and seem to be getting along you can leave the room for a few minutes at a time to go and clean the cage as described in the preparation section.

My first intro took 6 hours, my second one took 4. The length of the intro depends on the piggies. When some of the piggies start to nap and they are all fairly relaxed you can put them back into the newly cleaned cage. It is completely normal for the dominance behaviors to start back up again when you put them into the cage. Keep a close eye on them for the first hour or until things settle down again. During the first

week you may hear quite a bit of teeth chattering and rumblestrutting. This is totally normal and will likely decrease in frequency every day.

Weigh your piggies before the intro and then weigh them daily for the first couple of weeks. You want to make sure that everyone is getting the food that they need. [On a side note, it's a good idea to weigh your piggies weekly. As prey animals piggies are very good at hiding illnesses and weight loss is one of the main indicators of health problems.]



Introductions can be scary, but probably more so for the humans than for the guinea pigs. I was not happy to watch my sweeties intimidate and threaten each other, but I forced myself to stay out of it. I just kept my towel in my hand ready to throw it if a bloody fight threatened to break out. My little Temple did give 2 of the big girls little nips on the nose, but it wasn't too bad. After the 1st hour of the intro Temple wasn't as aggressive. She still kept trying to look fierce so everyone would know she was the boss, but now she has totally dropped that persona. My piggies were eating happily in close proximity to each other just a few days after the introduction. All of the time of working through a proper introduction will be worth it when you can see the end result of piggies that are so very happy to have a friend, or two, or six 😊