



Introduction/Background

The only safe *method* of bonding gerbils is the split tank method, this is because gerbils are very territorial and don't usually bond with members of the same sex in the wild, this method allows them to be slowly and safely introduced and effectively tricks them into thinking they're members of the same clan by making them smell like each other. While this is the only safe method of introducing gerbils, if you ask different people on the steps involved, you will likely get different answers depending on who you ask. This is because different people use different *variations* of the split tank method, most of which will be successful in at least some instances. You may hear that one specific variation is the *only way* to follow the split tank method, and even slight variations will cause it to fail, this isn't true, just like there isn't one exact way to make friends, there isn't just one exact way to bond gerbils. There are

some definite *rules* that must be followed to ensure the safety of the gerbils, but there are also many *variations* that can be tried if the particular variation you're following isn't working, different variations may work better for different gerbils or situations. *As long as the essential elements are followed, and you are there with bite-proof gloves at the ready to intervene should things go wrong, there's no harm in trying something different.* Of course, just like when us humans make friends, there are no guarantees with any variation, but being too strict about adhering to one particular set of steps, may not be beneficial for either the success of the bonding, or your own stress levels. *Below I go through some of the different variations I have seen done successfully and suggest some of the scenarios they may work better in.* Happy bonding!

Essential Rules

- The tank and *all* items used in the bonding tank must either be new (no gerbils used them previously) or if this isn't possible then the tank & items must be thoroughly cleaned with a 50/50 white vinegar & water solution to remove old scents, this is so that there aren't any scents of other gerbils/animals to disrupt the bonding
- *Enclosure must be separated with some sort of divider, whether this is a DIY mesh divider, or a small cage inside a large tank, the gerbils must be separated without the ability to get to each other before they are ready, while also allowing them to see and smell each other through the division*
- Gerbils must be swapped to a different side of the split tank at least once per day so they can equally spread their scents on both sides and both gerbils' scents get mixed together, they

should always be on a different side of the divider each night, so odd numbered swaps only, 1 or 3 is typical

- Gerbil bonding can generally only be done 1-1, the *only* exception to this rule is 1 adult-2 *young* pups (less than 8 weeks, starting at 6-7 weeks is preferable)
- They must be kept separate and not introduced for *at least* one week (possibly longer if there are lots of negative/lack of positive signs, or if they're in a larger tank) to allow them to properly get used to each other's scent
- When gerbils are initially put together to meet, they must be very closely observed and separated if there are negative signs (especially side arching or death balling) - see below (video examples can be found in my bonding video)

- **Positive signs**

In split:

- Friendly sniffs at divider
- General disinterest in one another
- Sleeping in each other's nests after swaps
- Hanging out near divider, near each other
- Attempted grooming through divider
- Progressively less scent marking

On playdates:

- General disinterest in one another
- Grooming
- **SNUGGLES** – this is the major positive sign we look for and generally indicates a successful bond, more so than the other signs

- **Negative signs**

In split:

- Constant foot thumping when seeing other gerbil (if only every few days, could be a sign of heat instead)
- Constant scent marking that hasn't reduced since starting the split
- Attempting to attack the other gerbil through the divider

On playdates:

- Lots of body tension
- Constant chasing (a short chase is okay, as long as it's not persistent and unrelenting)
- Side arching (this would be the equivalent of growling in dogs)
- Fighting (not-so-affectionately known as a "death ball") -
SEPARATE IMMEDIATELY

Variations

- Size of tank

- Some people may suggest that a bonding tank *has to be small in order for the bonding to work*. There is some merit to this idea, in that a smaller space will take less time for the gerbils to get their scents on everything and the gerbils will be closer together so will see each other more often and thus have more opportunities to interact with one another. *However*, I have seen many bondings work in a full-size tank (100x50cm), so a small space isn't strictly necessary. *A larger space allows the gerbils more space to roam, more bedding to dig in and generally more enrichment, but there is a possibility that the bonding may take longer in a larger space*. I personally have used both

- methods, and while the smaller tub bondings have taken less time, the larger tank bondings were much less stressful for both the gerbils and myself and didn't feel as rushed
- Hides
 - Some people suggest not to use any hides in a split because the gerbils can hide from each other. If I decide to use them, I typically use open-ended wood bridge hides which I put against the divider so that if the gerbils do hide in them, they're still not hiding from each other. *However*, I have seen successful bondings where there are closed hides on opposite sides of the tank, I've also used platforms on opposite sides of the tank in my larger tank bonding and it was still successful. In my first bonding I removed the hides after the initial few days, but I didn't in my second bonding and it didn't seem to make much difference. But removing hides is one option of varying the split if it's not working
 - Bedding depth
 - It's usually recommended to have virtually no bedding in a split tank for it to be successful. I usually have around 4-6 inches in mine, and many other people have bedding around this depth with successful bondings. I wouldn't recommend going as deep as a normal tank setup (10+ inches) as the gerbils could make full burrows in this and it may cause them to be more territorial. For meets the bedding should *definitely* be lowered to no more than an inch or so, so that you can see the gerbils at all times and intervene if things start getting heated. If the bonding isn't working you could consider lowering the bedding while they're split to see if it makes a difference

- Type of bedding
 - I personally use paper pulp bedding (like kaytee or carefresh) for my bondings because it holds more scent than other beddings so it may help with the scent association. Other people with successful bondings may use aspen or hemp. Although hemp is my preferred bedding for regular setups due to how much liquid it can hold and how resistant it is to getting stinky, for bonding it may not be the best option, although it definitely doesn't prevent bonding. If you're using something more scent-resistant for your bonding and it's not working, even after giving them extra time, starting fresh with something like paper pulp could be something worth trying
- Toys
 - Often it's suggested that gerbils either can't have any toys at all, or only 1 or 2 tubes per day max, or more toys could interfere with the bonding. I always give my bondings as many toys as will fit or that they can get through, and it hasn't impaired the bondings at all. Many others have experienced similar things with giving their bondings lots to do. But like previously, reducing the number of toys is a potential variation to try if there's issues
- Number of swaps
 - Different people suggest different numbers of swaps, usually 1, 3 or 5. It's often suggested to use an odd number so that the gerbils spend nights on opposite sides of the tank. I personally only swap once per day, I've tried increasing to 3 per day but it didn't seem to make much difference and added extra stress in my opinion. I personally think that 1 swap per day is more than sufficient and gives them more time to get their scent on everything

- than being moved around more often, but it could potentially make a difference if there's difficulties
- Where to do meets
 - I personally opt to do the meets on the calm gerbils' side of the split intentionally to slightly displace the pushier gerbil. Although their scents will be well mixed by the time they start playdates, the freshest scent will be of whichever gerbil was there most recently. This may not always work though, depending on the gerbil personalities, it could be worth removing the split and mixing the bedding around to make it as equal as possible. And if all else fails you could try meets in a completely neutral space like a bathtub, this is often how breeders may do introductions as it's how a male and female would naturally meet in the wild, but same-sex pairings aren't known to happen naturally, this is why we use the split tank method to try and trick the gerbils into thinking they're part of the same clan. This is why I wouldn't recommend neutral space meets in the first instance for same-sex bondings, although I have seen it work in some cases, and it may be useful as a backup option for gerbils that have unsuccessful meets with every other version and could perhaps be more territorial.
 - Age of gerbils
 - I personally prefer to do bondings with gerbils around a similar age if possible, this is so that they have a similar match of energies. But generally, a good match of personalities is more important, a more pushy/anxious gerbil tends to do best with a more relaxed/calm gerbil, but calm gerbils are usually okay with anyone. Some people may recommend doing bondings between an adult and a pup, which theoretically may be easier as an older gerbil would naturally accept younger siblings in the wild so it may

be a slightly more natural pairing. *However*, I don't like to do this as the bonding will never be guaranteed, and if a pup has been split up from their family in order to bond with someone new and it fails, that pup then risks being alone if they can't be rebonded with their siblings. I would much rather take in someone who is already alone so they have less to lose by taking the chance of bonding.

- Free roaming

→ Most people recommend not to free roam during bonding to try and keep the gerbils around each other as much as possible. I usually don't free roam, although I did a little bit in one of my bondings and it was still successful. I also know of people that regularly free roam while bonding and still have successful bondings. My main recommendation would be to avoid free roaming in any area where other gerbils or animals have been, as the gerbils could pick up the scents of the other animals and this could potentially interfere with bonding. If you choose to free roam, I'd recommend limiting it to a few times a week and for it to be a new/thoroughly cleaned playpen/area with new/thoroughly cleaned items.

- INTERVENTION

→ The most important thing I'd recommend while bonding is to intervene if things start looking negative. If you start to notice tension, separate them, it's better to separate sooner than to allow tension to escalate into fights which will cause a negative association with each other. Some people will instead just stick their hand in between the gerbils to try and distract them if there's tension, I generally don't recommend this as it allows the tension to potentially escalate, I think it's better to quit while we're ahead and end things on a more positive note. Some gerbils may need for

their meet time to be extended extremely slowly and it could take days or weeks to get them together for a few hours. If this really isn't working after a few weeks, try varying some of the other elements and see if they make a difference. But some pairings just aren't meant to be, it doesn't necessarily mean you've done anything wrong