



Socialization and Bonding

There are some rats that are by nature more insecure than others. Other rats have not had the benefit of being socialized at an early age. Even the most friendly and outgoing rats require love and attention to form a special bond with a human companion.

A. Bonding

In the early stages of getting to know your rat, it is very important to take him or her away from the cage. Take him into another room in the house when you hold him. Rats instinctively want to go back to their home when they are unsure or frightened, so you should keep him out of his cage and the other rats. At that point YOU become his safety net. If you are worried that he may try to get away from you, start out in the bathroom; you can sit in the empty tub with him, but bring a pillow to get comfortable on!

The following are strategies that will help the rat know that you are in control--giving it security--and that you are its friend. By being patient and using these methods, we often find that even the rats that take the most work end up being some of the most loving and strongly bonded to their people!

1. The bonding pouch or reverse hoodie

By carrying your rat around in the safety of a bonding pouch or hoodie hood, you provide a place to "hide" while he gets used to being around you. Your smells, your warmth, and the movement of your body as you walk around will all become familiar to him, and he will become more comfortable with you. You can take carry your rat around in this way while doing chores or computer work, and your rat can fall asleep if he wants, or he can climb onto your shoulder and check out the world. You can get things done while bonding with your rat!

2. The 20 minute hold

Though it may not be 100% comfortable for you at first, this method is very effective. The idea behind this is that a rat is not able to hold on to fear for more than a certain amount of time (somewhere less than 20 minutes), and if you hold him for 20 minutes, he will let go of his fear before the time's up. This doesn't always work the first time, but generally if you do it once/day for a week you'll see a huge difference (feel free to watch a 30 minute TV show so that you're not overly bored). The goal is to have your hands on him for the entire 20 minutes. He will try to get away from you at first, but you're not hurting him, and he'll begin to understand that. Ideally partially through the 20 minutes he will start to groom himself. That's usually the first sign that he's calming down and becoming comfortable hanging out with you. After that, a treat is definitely in order!

3. Grooming

This can be done during the 20 minute hold. Dominant rats will groom the less dominant rats to let them know who's boss. If you wet your finger (just damp, like a rat's tongue - not really wet) and rub around his ears, cheeks, and under his chin, you'll be letting him know that you're dominant to him.

4. Talking to him

Some rats have a harder time seeing than others. While you're still working on gaining trust, you can talk to him every time that you're about to pick him up. If he's not startled, he's much less likely to bite or run.

B. Socialization

Adult and juvenile rats end up in rescue for many reasons. Some have behaviour problems, especially biting. These issues can arise from excess male hormones, lack of handling as babies, or acquired bad habits. Using a simple, structured approach, you can form a new social bond of trust with your rescue rat.

You can't explain things to a rat, so you must show the rat you can be his friend. The rules aren't complicated, but to get results, you need to stick to them. Consistency is essential. Patience is essential too. This process takes time - but it builds a special close bond with your new friend! It's a richly rewarding experience.

If there are children in your home, an adult should do the socialization procedure.

1. Settling in & overall tips

In his or her new home, the nervous rat should be placed in a small, quiet, secure, uninteresting cage – in other words, a safe but boring cage. The rat needs one private area he can retreat to (for example, a cardboard box). Apart from that, the cage should be unfurnished. You can't get hold of a scared rat if the cage is full of stuff.

Let him settle in for a couple of days, without trying to handle him. Talk to him a lot, so that he learns your voice. Call him and gently rattle the food in its container, each time you feed him. He gets his regular bland food (plain chow or lab blocks) - but no treats!

Never feed the rat through the cage bars. Feeding through the bars is a great way to teach him to snap at fingers!

If the rat is a male and in good health, **neutering** should be done after about one week in his new home. With aggressive rescue males, neutering is a key step. Aggression levels will gradually subside during the month following the operation. Neutering makes integration with other rats less difficult, and it facilitates taming. (*See below for more comments on neutering.*)

After a few days, begin handling the rat.

2. The next steps

When you begin handling, talk softly to your rat throughout. It doesn't matter to the rat what you say, but repetition of positive comments ("Good boy, lovely ratty, what a beautiful girl, isn't this nice" etc.) will calm you and improve your own mood and tone of voice, as well as let the rat get used to your presence.

Never pick a rat up by the tail! This is terrifying to a rat and can cause serious injuries to the tail or spine. The best way to pick up a rat is by scooping gently from underneath and/or the sides (which may be difficult in the early stages, but keep at it!). Rats are prey animals and thus tend to react negatively to being approached by a claw-like appendage from above.

Hold the rat in your arms, partly confined in a towel if you are nervous about scratches or bites. Walk slowly around for a brief time - less than a minute. Keep it brief because the rat will not enjoy the experience at first. In fact he may act like he is on hot coals! Don't worry, just gently confine him and walk around a bit. During this time, begin gently "scratching" (imitation grooming) the rat's neck and shoulders – if he is a biter, do it from behind with the rat facing away from your hand. Do your best to not let anything frighten him while you are holding him. No loud noises, no cats, no dogs, etc.

At the end of each short handling session, offer him a treat. At first he'll be too frightened to take it. This is normal. Place the rat and the treat back in the cage together. Draw the rat's attention to the treat. He'll eat it soon enough. Later, as he gains confidence, he'll take the treat sooner.

Repeat the above steps as often as possible – many times a day! Go through them every time you pass the rat's cage. Keep it simple and consistent. You're earning the rat's trust. Treats, social grooming, and a change of scene – these are the rat's rewards for accepting handling. The time required for progress varies with the individual rat, so play it by ear. Don't rush things.

3. Tips for biters

- Use a small towel to pick him up. The towel saves your hands, and also frightens the rat less than your hands do. As a rule the rat will not bite the towel. Holding him in the towel in your arms allows him to feel relatively secure. A rat is a burrowing animal, and when it's frightened, it instinctively wants to feel its body is enclosed as much as possible.

- Never use gloves. They only blunt your sense of touch and tempt you to squeeze too hard. Also they do not enclose the rat reassuringly the way a towel does.
- Try to avoid invading the rat's private box. Wait for a moment when he's come out of his box of his own accord. (By now he may come out when you rattle his food container.) Reach in with the towel. Using the towel, gently block him from running back into his box.
- Be gentle but firm. Don't rush, but try not to let him get clean away - he needs to learn that it doesn't do any good to fight handling. Gradually confine him in the towel (use the corners of the cage) and pick him up in it.
- Use a high pitched 'eep' whenever you need to enter the cage or open the door or do anything where they could bite you. Do not put yourself in a situation where they would be able to bite you. Keep your fist closed in the cage.

4. Establishing trust

After several days, most rats will become more accustomed to handling. Start walking around for longer periods with the rat in your arms. Go into different rooms. The rat is learning that people bring him nice things: treats, scratches, company, and interesting changes of scene. People are more fun than his boring cage.

When the rat accepts handling well, move to the next step. Sit with him in a safe chair. Let him explore you and the chair. Give treats and scratches frequently throughout the session. Scratches are as important as treats – especially for single rats. Rats have a strong instinctive need for social grooming.

Repeat frequently. If the rat becomes too frightened, go back to the earlier stage. When trust is well established, you can start introducing your new rescue to other rats in a neutral area. See our document on **Introductions** for more information on this topic.

5. Final tips

- **Don't give the rat treats or liberty "for free".**
This is really important. Until handling is well accepted, treats should only be given during handling, and no free running should be allowed.
- **Let the rat feel as secure as possible.**
For example - carrying an unsocialized rat on your shoulder is not constructive. This is a very exposed, insecure place for an untamed rat. And this is not teaching him to accept being held.

- **Why all this talking to the rat? Here's why:**

Despite their prominent eyes, rats have very poor vision compared to ours. A rat can see almost the whole room at once (including behind and above her) but she can't really "look" at specific things like we can. Rats get comparatively little information from their eyes and can't be expected to recognize people by sight. To a rat's eyes, you're just a giant looming Thing. But she has excellent hearing, and she'll quickly learn to recognize you by your voice. *It's all part of building trust.*

C. Neutering

Neutering removes the source of male hormones, which create heightened aggression and superdominance in some adult males. The change doesn't happen overnight. But normally, after a couple of weeks, a noticeable change in the rat's responses can be seen. After a month the difference is dramatic. A formerly tense, excitable, hair-trigger male becomes happy and relaxed.

Neutering doesn't remove all aggression, but it greatly reduces it. Together with socialization, neutering is a key component of rescue rat welfare. Combined with the socialization method described above, neutering can potentially transform even savage adult males - rats who attack the human hand - into peaceful, friendly, delightful pets. I have personally seen this happen.

Another advantage is that neutered male and female rescues can be kept together in compatible groups.

Spaying doesn't reduce female aggression so dramatically - but it gives excellent protection against mammary tumors, which unfortunately are very common in rats.