



## **Bonding and Socialization**

Rats, often called “pocket dogs”, make wonderful pets and can bond strongly with their human. Some rats, however, are by nature more insecure than others. Many 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 and maintain a special bond with a human companion.

The following strategies will help the rat feel confident that you are its friend. Even rats who take the most work can become very loving and strongly bonded to their people.

### **A. Bonding for all rats**

#### **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 become familiar to him, and he will become more comfortable with you. You can 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!

#### **Grooming**

Rats often groom each other. 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 can groom your rat.

#### **Talking to him**

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

### **B. Socialization for scared/nervous rats**

Adult and juvenile rats end up in rescue for many reasons. Some have behavior problems, such as nipping/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 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 and patience are essential. This process takes time - but it builds a special bond with your new friend and is a richly rewarding experience.

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

### Settling in & overall tips

In his new home, the nervous rat should be placed in a secure cage with at least one private area he can retreat to, for example, a cardboard box. Apart from that, the cage should be minimally furnished, not overly cluttered. 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.

Avoid feeding your rat through the cage bars as they may then think anything that comes through the cage bars is food, including fingers.

If the rat is a male and in good health, **neutering** should be considered. 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.

### Next Steps

When you begin handling, talk softly to your rat continuously. 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.

In the early stages of getting to know your rat, take him into another room of the house so that they are not attempting to jump back into their cage. 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 for your comfort!

Hold the rat in your arms, 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 "scritch" (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. You can also offer something yummy (baby cereal, whipped cream) off of a spoon. This is a trust building exercise.

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.

### 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 scenery. 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. If you have a larger safe free roam space, sit in the middle of the space and let your rat explore you and the area itself. They may be too timid to approach you at first and that is ok! It may take some time, but letting the rat come to you and “check you out” when he is ready is a confidence builder. Give treats and scratches frequently throughout the session. Scratches are as important as treats. Rats have a strong instinctive need for social grooming.

Repeat frequently. If the rat becomes too frightened, go back to an 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.

### Final Tips

- **Have lots of treats on hand!**  
Be ready to offer lots of healthy treats so that the rat associates you, and coming out of their cage, with goodies.
- **Make sure your rat is secure when transporting.**  
You can encourage your rat to independently climb into a transport container, such as a box, for transport. Do not carry an unsocialized rat on your shoulder, as a serious injury may result should they startle and fall.

- **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 him) but he 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. He has excellent hearing, though, and he'll quickly learn to recognize you by your voice. *It's all part of building trust.*

### **C. Tips for Biters**

- If you need to pick him up, use a small towel. 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 enclosed as much as possible.
- Avoid picking up the rat with gloves as they 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 until he's come out of his box of his own accord. Reach in with the towel. Using the towel, gently block him from running back into his box.
- Be gentle but firm. Don't rush. 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.

### **D. Neutering**

Neutering removes the source of male hormones, which creates heightened aggression and superdominance in some adult males. The change doesn't happen overnight. 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 methods described above, neutering can potentially transform even savage adult males - rats who attack the human hand - into peaceful, friendly, delightful pets.

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.

**E. For even more help - Rat Training and Behavior Coach**

MRR's team includes a Rat Training and Behavior Coach, who guides adopters via online classes and/or private consultations. For more information, please contact Sandy  
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