

# Bonding with Your New Rescue Rat

## By Sandy M

How long it takes to bond with a rescue rat will depend on several factors including the rat's past experiences or lack thereof, their individual temperament, and your effort to form a relationship. It might take time and it may be different from what you expect, but there's no such thing as a rat being too old to form an emotional relationship with a new human. Here are a few tips to help you build the foundation to a trusting bond with your new rescue rat.

### Settling In

In their new home, the new rat should be placed in a quiet, secure cage with plenty of places to hide. A place to decompress. Inside their cage, rats need one private area they can retreat to per rat (for example, a cardboard box, a hammock or a Sputnik. Add fall breakers, a chew toy and a few perches. It's difficult to get close to a scared rat if the cage is too cluttered. But, your new rat needs places to hide, climb, dig, forage and rest. Find a balance, leave some room for both of you to move around while providing for these needs.

Let him settle in for a couple of days, without trying to handle him or pick him up right away. 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.

Don't try to give them treats from your hand during this period. If they want the treats but are afraid of your hand they may grab them roughly and your finger could unintentionally get grabbed too. If you give treats, tossing them on the cage floor allows your rats to get them without potentially feeling conflicted. They will still know who gave it to them. As they eat it speak softly to them "what a good ratty" "is that yummy?"

A recently adopted rat in a new environment with humans they don't know is often stressed, anxious, and maybe even scared. It's important to give them the space they need to adjust, but totally ignoring them isn't the way to go either. Gauge your actions based on your rat's behavior and find a balance between giving them space and making them feel like part of the family.

Talking to your rat isn't as crazy as non-rat people believe. Studies show that talking to animals is beneficial for both humans and animals.

### Getting acquainted

After allowing them to settle into their new home for a few days, start spending purposeful time together. As they continue to spend time with their new human, they'll become more comfortable interacting.

When you begin handling, talk softly to your rat throughout and offer your special treats. 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" will calm you and improve your own mood and tone of voice, as well as let the rat get used to your presence.

Pay attention to your rat's body language. If at any point during approaching or handling your rat becomes very still, frozen, looks poofy, bristled (fur stands up) or starts huffing they are trying to tell you something. These are signs that your rat may be getting very frightened and you need to take a step back and slow things down a bit.

When they are ready, the best way to pick up a rat is by scooping gently from underneath and/or the sides. Rats are prey animals and thus tend to find it unpleasant to be approached by a claw-like appendage from above. NEVER pick a rat up by the tail! This is terrifying to a rat and can cause serious injuries to the tail or spine.

Once you pick them up, hold them gently in your arms and slowly move around for a brief time - less than a minute. Some rats are more comfortable walking from one hand to the other rather than being cradled and that's fine too. Avoid squeezing them as it can be uncomfortable and frightening. Keep it brief because the rat may not enjoy the experience the first few times. When they seem relaxed, begin gently "scratching" (imitation grooming) the rat's neck and shoulders. Do your best to not let anything frighten him while you are holding him. No loud noises, no cats, no dogs, etc.

Many people use a bonding pouch or reverse hoodie, carrying their new rat around in safety, while also providing a place to "hide" while they get used to them. If they enjoy it, you can carry your rat around in this way while talking to them and your rat may even fall asleep or he can climb onto your shoulder and check out the world. At the end of each short handling session, offer him a treat.

### Be a Reliable Human

When a rat ends up at a rescue, their trust was broken at least once before or perhaps they never had that bond before. Whether they were given up by a previous family or an uncontrollable situation led to a heartbreaking separation, something happened to change the rat's life. That shift in circumstances taught the rat an unfortunate lesson, things and people they love aren't always reliable. Their confidence in the good things may have been shaken, and they need someone to renew their trust in humans. You need to show them that despite all of life's unknowns, they can count on you/humans to be there to care for them.

Develop a daily routine. Keep your interactions consistent and predictable. With time, they'll learn what to expect, and they'll begin to trust you enough to form an emotional bond. Offering special yummy treats several times a day helps him associate you with good things.

### Let Go of Expectations

Whether you have shared an unbreakable bond with a previous heart rat or simply love the stories of rats bonded with their humans, now is the time to forget those expectations. Every rat is an individual, and every relationship is unique. It's not fair to compare what you have with a new rescue rat with idealized vision you have worked up in your mind. The disappointment you feel when things don't work out exactly as you imagined will be an emotional barrier to building a relationship with your new rescue rat.

Many rats are willing to hand over their whole heart after the first head scratch, but that doesn't always happen. Some rescue rats have learned hard lessons from difficult pasts, but that doesn't make them any less deserving of love or any less willing to give it. What they need is time, patience, and compassion to feel safe enough to trust their hearts to a new human.