

Introducing Rats to Rats By Sandy M

When introducing rats to rats “you get there faster when you go slow.” This means the common approach of putting new rats in with current rats in a small place like a carrier and waiting for them to work it out between themselves, is not always ideal, especially for rats that may have had some challenges in their past. Many rats will find this method aversive. While some people do use this method without any problems, it's likely that those rats would have been fast friends regardless of introduction methods. It's also likely that sometimes human observers think they see calm but are actually seeing learned helplessness, a behavioral phenomenon where animals see no way of avoiding stressful stimuli so they simply stop responding. They are still stressed or fearful, but to the untrained eye they appear to be calm because they stop responding.

For these reasons a slow, supervised introduction with enough space for rats to get away from each other if they want to and plenty of places to hide is better. These introductions are usually easy, but they might not be. Sometimes it only takes one playdate but typically takes a couple days, on rare occasions they can take weeks. How it goes and how long it takes will depend on the rats, their learning history, mood and emotional state, your experience, how relaxed you are, the environment and keeping the initial playdates short. A first playdate may be 5-10 minutes.

Initial success will depend on your being able to prevent fearful rats being harassed and preventing over arousal that can drift into fighting. Wrestling and boxing is normal, but the time for that is after a trust bond is established.

1. Using an object that they are familiar with like a piece of cardboard or your gloved hand to place in between rats if they need a break is often helpful. As they interact with each other, try to prevent dust ups BEFORE they happen. We want to focus on preventing stress that can lead to a fight rather than break up a fight. Gently separating two rats who appear poofy, ridged or bristled, or when one rat seems to be pestering another keeps them safe and genuinely calm. Become comfortable just moving your hand or object between the rats to separate them briefly. With all this supervision, you will give the rats ample pleasant interactions that will help them to learn to feel safe around each other.
2. When introducing multiple established rats to a new group of two or more, it may be helpful to start the playdates with only one rat from each group. Once they are comfortable in pairs you can start double playdates, with two from each established group and continue slowly adding until they are all enjoying playtime together. When you can't recall the last time you needed to intervene on behalf of a fearful rat or had to interrupt an over aroused rat and playdates are over 30 minutes long, it is time to try sharing a cage. If it's possible, have them out for a playdate together in the morning while you set up the new cage they will be in together. This way they can sleep on and off together all day and have that quiet time to get used to the idea of living together full time.

To achieve a successful introduction with less stress and less risk of potential fallout remember to

- Do several brief introductions as playdates.
- Offer several hides with multiple exits and no bottom to lessen the possibility of a rat feeling trapped and make it easy to get squabbling rats out if needed.
- Offer a foraging activity like pea fishing or a dig box. These activities give the rats something to do that makes them feel good in the presence of the new rats and helps them to not obsess about the new guy.
- End the playdate BEFORE anyone is stressed and repeat the sessions as many times as necessary before proceeding to the next stage. The first playdate may only be 5-10 minutes.
- If possible do the first few playdates at a time of day when they are typically not very active.
- In between playdates you can help them get familiar with each other. Dirty hammock swapping, box hide swapping and cage swapping. I frequently put the rats back after a playdate in each other's cages.
- Don't allow rats to harass each other or become over aroused. A sniff by is great and should last for a few seconds. But one rat relentlessly following a rat that is continually walking away can become annoying to the rat being followed. This can drift into fights. Avoiding this is an extremely important factor in success.
- During the first sessions keep the rats from being near each other for longer than a quick sniff by and interrupt any interaction if one or both rats become frozen, bristled or puffed up.

This combination of pleasant activities and ending while everyone is relaxed, will provide the rats with an excellent learning environment and ensures they genuinely enjoy each other's company before they are left alone in the cage together.

If you are having trouble with introducing your established rats to your new rats please contact us for assistance. mrr.sandym@gmail.com