

Why Did My Rat Bite The Dog

A random bite incident causes an owner concern about handling a pet rat.

By Carol Lawton

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Q: I have a question about our pet rat, Butter. We've had her since January. She is very gentle and loving and all three of my children are able to handle her. We have two cats and a dog. The cats never really give Butter and I much space when I have her out, but they are afraid of her. I can tell by her behavior that she does not like having them around, and she has chased them off when they get too close. In other words, she gives me behavioral clues as to what she will do around the cats.

One night I was sitting on the ground with her and our dog had to join in. No one gives the poor thing her space. Well, I was right in the middle of the exploration and all her behavioral cues seemed to say that she was fine with the dog being around. I had my hand up under his mouth and she was exploring him. Well, she made her way up to the bend in his leg and out of nowhere bit him on a major blood vessel. It was a tiny bite, of course, but it was at just the spot where he lost a lot of blood.

Now my girls are scared of her, and I'm a little cautious myself. I was wondering if you could tell me what might have provoked her to bite him, especially since she was not displaying any behavior that she was uncomfortable around him. Did she intentionally go for the most vulnerable spot on the dog? And should there be any cause for concern to have the girls handling her.

A: I'm so relieved to hear that neither your dog nor Butter suffered any permanent injury during this incident, it truly could have been so much worse.

To understand what happened between your pets you need to see them as they see each other – as predator and prey. While dogs, cats and rats are all domesticated animals, they still have instincts and occasionally act on them. Prey animals such as mice, rats and rabbits naturally hide the signs of illness or fear so predators won't know that they are vulnerable. This is why Butter appears to be calm when she's near the other pets.

During the incident with the dog, Butter might have seemed calm but was probably very frightened. The dog might have exhibited some sign of tension that Butter, in her nervous state, interpreted as a sign to defend herself, which she did. I don't believe that she was looking for a vulnerable spot, I think that was just a very unfortunate accident.

Is there cause for concern with handling Butter? I think you need to look at Butter's excellent history with your family to decide that. And in doing so, keep in mind that during a time when she was extremely stressed she did not act out against you or the children. If you do choose to continue sharing time with Butter, I think it is in everyone's best interest to create some time just for her so she isn't feeling frightened or threatened by the other animals. Our pets are always at their best when they feel safe and secure.