

## Introducing An Older Rat To Young Rats

**What's the proper way to introduce the rats so that they will get along?**

*By Carol Lawton*

Posted: February 13, 2009, 8 p.m. EST

**Q:** I have a black and white male rat named Xavier. He's 8 months old. I go to a career center and I'm in the veterinary science lab. In my lab, we have rats. We breed them to feed to snakes, which I am opposed to. I brought two pregnant rats home over the holidays. One rat had a litter of 10, and the other had a litter of two. My younger sister has grown attached to one of the babies in the litter of 10 and wants to keep him. If we do keep him, how do I properly introduce him to Xavier? He's a super sweet rat, but I don't know how he would react to having a baby rat living with him. I know you don't just put the baby in his cage, because most likely Xavier will hurt or kill the baby. (Xavier's never lived with other rats before.) How can I introduce them so that neither rat gets hurt?

**A:** Since Xavier is somewhat older, a pair of young male rats is the best option. This gives Xavier the companionship he needs and gives the babies a high energy play companion. Also, if Xavier decides he doesn't want a cage mate, you won't end up with two single rats.

Male rats are often excellent fathers and are usually very gentle with babies. I suggest a carefully monitored introduction to a pair of young males when they are between 6 and 8 weeks old. Choose a neutral territory, such as the couch, where you have easy access to each rat. Put the babies on the couch, and let them play for a while. Then, put Xavier on the arm of the couch and carefully watch his reaction. Allow the babies to approach him, but watch him closely and be ready to pick him up if he shows any signs of aggression.

Behaviors such as puffing up his coat, rubbing his side along the babies or nips that result in bleeding are considered real aggression. Squeaking is OK, but if it's excessive or prolonged, watch very closely for other signs that things aren't going well. Your first obligation is to the safety of all of your pets, and the introduction should be stopped if Xavier shows any signs of real aggression.

Start with a 15-minute session the first day, then add 15 minutes each day until they are together comfortably for an hour. Once you achieve that point, you can allow them all access to a clean neutral cage. Xavier might be a little protective of his personal space, so a neutral cage is very important at this step. Again, watch them carefully to make sure all the rats are doing well, but by this time they should be comfortable and content together.

Best wishes to you and Xavier on the introduction to his new friends.

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