

Resocializing A Rat

If a once-friendly rat suddenly starts biting and doing other negative behaviors, how can these be trained away?

By Carol Lawton

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Q: A couple of weeks ago I bought my daughter a pet rat, Mr. Sparkle Snow, that is 6 months old. He was great; he didn't bite and liked being around us. Then we bought another younger rat that was very, very skittish. He made our first rat, Mr. Sparkle Snow, skittish, and now he is biting us a lot. We play with him every day. We took the younger rat back to the pet store, but now it seems like Mr. Sparkle Snow is just mean and unhappy. Does that mean he is in need of another friend? Also, I tried out four cages in four days and finally settled on one — it is an aquarium with a 3-story tower. Is this bad? I did research, but I guess I didn't realize how much work a rat would be. Can someone tell me what I am doing wrong? Now my daughter doesn't want Mr. Sparkle Snow.

A: At 6 months old, a male rat is considered an adult and can be pretty set in his ways, so changes can be more difficult for them to handle. Mr. Sparkle Snow went through a lot in a very short period of time: he got a new family, acquired a new cagemate, lost his cagemate, then went through several new houses. That's enough to make even the most friendly and stable rat lose his cool. However, biting cannot be tolerated and action must be taken immediately.

You need to allow Mr. Sparkle Snow some time to settle in and settle down again, any changes right now will just make things worse.

Start by giving your rat a couple of undisturbed days in his cage in a quiet area of the house. Feed and water him and talk quietly and gently to him, but do not reach in his cage for any reason. After a few days you can move him to a more central area and begin a slow and gentle reintroduction to the family.

Take the topper off of his aquarium and let him come out if he chooses to, but do not force him to come out. Make sure he has a box or an igloo in his cage so he can hide if he feels the need to, and respect that his cage is his "safe place" and let it be a place he can retreat to if he's feeling frightened or threatened. Allow him to approach you rather than reaching for him.

When your rat does come out, offer him little treats like pieces of cooked pasta, oat cereal (like Cheerios), or small bits of whole-grain bread. Continue this on a regular basis for a few weeks, and he should begin acting more comfortable and confident about his home and family again.

These actions allow socialization to be on your rat's terms and should correct much of the negative behavior.

Best wishes to you and Mr. Sparkle Snow.

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