

Bitey Rat?

What worked for us was....

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OK, so you got a new fur baby. It looked so cute and you just couldn't resist. You have a cage all set up and ready for him waiting at home. Now your home and your rat is in its cage. Excitement fills the air at the thought of a new pet. You open the door to the cage and WHAM! You get bit. You're heartbroken. What did you do wrong is your first thought? You wash your hands thinking maybe they smell of food or something else your little one doesn't like. You try again and WHAM! Another bite.

You need help. Where do you go? Well, hopefully what worked for us will work for you.

Let's look at some things first –

1. How is it acting? When is it biting?
2. What is the age of your rat?
3. Male or Female?
4. Spayed or Neutered?
5. Conditions of its living where it came from.
6. Activity around its cage in your home.
7. Color of its eyes.

We will address each item one at a time. You will have to think about what applies to your rat.

What is the cause of your rat's aggressive behavior? Understanding the aggressiveness can lead to a more successful outcome and the understanding of what is needed to get to that outcome. For example

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Tarzan came to the rescue I work at. He had been attacked by dogs outside. Yep, he had been outside and was not a wild rat but a domestic hooded rat. Was he part wild? We will never know. But he most certainly didn't belong outdoors.

The person that discovered him in his dog's mouth was horrified. After realizing the bad wounds he sustained wasn't going to kill him a cage was procured and he raised him until he healed. He said he was tame for him. But when he arrived at BFRR where there were other rats in their cages he became aggressive. He was still in his own cage, but he could now smell other rats – boys and girls. Most likely he was very confused. His problem was twofold at least – A. Hormones and smelling the other rats and wanting to keep them from his own territory. B. Fear of being attacked again so he had to appear fearless. For him (His story will be at the end of this guide) it was a long but very successful road.

Another reason for biting could be the rat was mistreated. A few categories of mistreatment can happen like being fed to a snake and the snake not wanting it or being picked up in a forceful way with no caring on how it felt to the rat. Another could be that the rat lived in a small cage with many other rats and had to fight for food or a place to sleep and quite possibly having another rat fight with it often.

But most of the time what happens is that a rat has not been handled by a human for most of its life and so has no idea that it can actually trust one. So it is protecting itself from the unknown of this creature that is much larger than itself.

Once you identify the possible cause or causes of your rat's biting let's look at the age issue, whether it is Male or Female and is it Spayed or Neutered.

If your rat is a baby, under 4 months old, then there shouldn't be a biting issue. If there is then it could be a medical one. So much inbreeding happens with rats that are not from a good breeder. Pet stores in particular are notorious for just letting any rat mate with another in order to provide stock to sell as snake food first and occasionally as pets second. This can cause medical issues – deformities or brain issues. Alas – if this is the case there will be no treatment and you will only realize this after trying your hardest to gain its trust and affection and failing.

But it could be something as simple as it isn't feeling well. If you suspect something medical then take the little one to your vet. It would be a good idea to do this anyway and you can get a feel for how good your vet will be for your little one. And if it is a medical issue and can be healed then quite possibly that will be all it takes to stop the biting. Think of how you might feel with a very bad toothache and having to deal with someone wanting to play all the time. Wouldn't you holler? Biting is their way of hollering at you to stay away.

Hormones are the next to think about. Around 4 months old is when the hormones start to kick in. As in humans, some rats produce more hormones than others and cause different issues like a stronger Fright or Flight mode or Territorial guarding or just plain nervousness. If your rat is 4 months or older then the first thing to do would be to spay or neuter them. Spaying a girl will also help to cut down her chances of getting hormone related tumors in her future and cutting out the possibility of accidental litters. Neutering males doesn't lessen tumors but will affect issues mentioned above – in a good way.

If your rat is female and came from a pet store and there were a few rats in the cage with her there could be a possibility your little girl is pregnant. They can get pregnant at 5 weeks old. Sad, but very true. Also sad but true is that most pet store personnel do not know how to sex the rats and therefore males and females are put in the same cage together. All it takes is a second and the deed is done. A vet visit could help you determine if she is, but often until they get large just days before the birth you may not have a clue. There are many good websites regarding the preparation of a litter to help ensure most of the babies will survive. You can do an emergency spay but I myself shy away from that. There are some very good valid reasons for an e-spay like the mother has a high chance of not making it through the birth. But if it is because she came to us pregnant already, I opt to let her have her litter and then wean them and then spay her. But this is a decision you would have to make to be something you can live with.

We have dealt with the first 5 items in the list and now comes the last in our list – Conditions in your home around your rat’s cage.

When your new one comes to your home you have to realize there are different sounds and smells. Sometimes those alone can be a lot for your little one to get used to. But if you add in kids yelling and screaming or poking fingers into the cage or maybe dogs barking and nudging the cage or cats meowing and sitting on the cage and possibly trying to get to the rat through the bars then you have added a whole host of other issues that quite honestly would make me bite too. So when you bring home your rat try to have the cage in a place of little traffic, no other pets, and no drafts with a pretty constant temperature. They are susceptible to Upper Respiratory Infections like some people are to colds. Being in a stressful situation or a drafty place can weaken their immune system causing them to get sick. And as with any prey animal they hide it well until they are too sick and you start to notice it.

Now – other than the medical or pregnancy issues causing aggressive behavior I have found the way I will be talking about to work the best for all other issues. So here we go. Keep in mind this is what worked for us time and again and that it is something to use as a guide and you can certainly adjust to whatever works. And if you find something to add that works then by all means add it. Anything that will help you break that barrier of fear or defense to reach your rat and let them know all you have for them is Love and they will never be harmed with you.

Steps in the Trust training

First thing is to get your rat into a clean cage with nothing from a previous cage. Thinking they would feel more comfortable with something from their prior home is something we found actually promotes the defense feeling of their new home. Giving them a new cage with no prior rat smells is a good thing. They will have to get used to it and you at the same time.

Make sure the cage is in a place where you can access the rat safely. We found that a 4’ table with the cage at one end and a rubber backed (to prevent slipping) bath mat cover the rest of the table. The opening of the cage should be facing the rest of the table. And if you can get a cage where the bottom door will open flush to the table or act as a ramp to the table at a gentle angle then that would be awesome. What you are doing here is to provide an escape back into its cage if it feels threatened and an easy exit onto the table when it feels comfortable. Make sure the table is far enough away from anything it may want to jump to. You want your rat’s world to be the cage, table and you only.

Get scraps of material. Sounds funny huh? They don’t have to be big. Can be an old t-shirt cut up into 8-10” pieces. Now each night tuck one inside your jammies while you sleep. Each morning you will place it in the cage with your rat. This will help your rat get used to your smell and understand there is no pain or threats associated with you. You could eventually add a treat sitting on the fabric piece to act as reinforcement that you are not a threat. Don’t be surprised if at first this material piece is shredded. Tarzan did that with the first few pieces I put in there. But as time went on he ended up snuggling with it.

Get a chair to sit at the table. Make sure you can sit as close to the cage as possible so your rat can smell you and feel your calmness. If you have had a horrible day at work or frustrating time with the kids then you should wait until you have calmed down before trying to calm your rat down. They can sense your anxieties and bad energies you give off. You want your new baby to trust you. Later on you won't have to be as careful but right now it is critical that all they sense is Love and calmness from you.

Get a good book. Something you might like to read. A chapter book works best. You will be reading a chapter or two at a time to your little one. Why? Well, reading a book – a physical book – is calming to both rat and human. Something about page turning and not swiping a screen relaxes the brain and can make a story more exciting at what comes when the page is turned. Later on when your rat trusts enough to start to come out of the cage and walk around your book will be walked on. If you pull away because you don't want your expensive iPad or tablet to be ruined then you frighten your rat and put that trust you have earned to that point many steps back. Let your rat sniff the book, taste the book, walk on the book as you continue to read steadily. At this point you will have to use your judgement on turning pages. At first we waited until Tarzan was away from the book. Later on he "helped" to turn the pages.

Find treats to offer. Yogis aren't the best nutritionally unless you make them yourself. But they are almost never refused. Shelled Almonds are another treat that seems to work. But you will have to judge what works. Everyone has different taste buds.

So now you have the cage set up, a chair for you to sit in, treats at the ready, been using the material to get your rattie used to your smell and a good book to read. Now for the most important thing of all – An Uninterrupted block of time. At least 15 minutes if not a half hour. Rats are cautious creatures being they are at the lower end of the food chain. So it takes a while – about 15 minutes for them to relax when they finally realize there is no threat to their safety. After those first 15 minutes will be when they start to learn to trust and possibly Love you later on.

This all will take time. Some get it sooner and others it will take a while. For us, Romeo and Tarzan took two months to get them to totally trust and actually give Love in return. But your little one, depending on what created the aggressive issue in the first place, could take less time or possibly more. Go slow. Watch the behavior and let that be your guide on how fast or slow you should go. For Tarzan – well, let's just say he wrapped me around his little paw and I still read to him more than a year later.

Steps –

1. Start the material pieces right away. Your rat may shred them, dance madly at it, bury it, try to push it out of the cage. It may increase the anger dance. We call it the Tarzan Dance. Fluffing the fur, jumping up and down in the cage and from side to side trying to get to you to shred you to pieces and huffing and puffing and sometimes hissing. But you will notice as time goes on and you work with your little one this behavior will decrease. Most of it is really fear based.
2. Every day and twice a day if you can, maybe morning and at night, sit quietly by the cage. As close as you can so your rat can smell you. Try not to do any sudden movements. Don't talk to your rat just yet. Don't look in their eyes. Maybe read a book quietly to yourself or write a letter

or do homework. This will occupy your time and allow your rat to realize you are not a threat. We did this for 3-4 days. Once you see your rat calm and actually sit somewhere in its cage quietly while you are there, you know you can progress to the next step. Even if at the slightest movement you make sparks another hissing round you are ready for that next step.

3. Once your little one can relax a little while you sit near it you can start reading aloud. This may spark the Hissing, jumping thing again. But you will notice the calmness happen sooner each time. Tarzan started out with his hissing and jumping all around the cage and even at me as I sat there reading. Then one day I noticed his slow walking to the area of the cage closest to me out of the corner of my eye. He sat there facing me as if he was actually listening to the story. That made my heart leap in happiness until I moved and he started the hissyfit all over again. Eventually whenever I came into the room he would head straight for his seat closest to me watching me as I opened the book and relaxed almost to the point of dreaming.
4. Once your rat is at a point of no more hissing or jumping or any aggressive moves while you are there the next step will be to get your rat to trust you enough where you can touch him. Do not try to reach in the cage and take it out. It feels safe in his home and if you reach in to get him you are telling him this space is no longer a safe place. You want your rat to come to you. Thus the bottom cage door being able to open onto the table easily for your little one to easily get out and in whenever it wants. Put a treat on the door of the cage right at the opening and go back to reading watching him out of the corner of your eye. Let your rat come to it and take it. Offer another a little farther away towards the table but still on the opened door. If your rat takes it do it again a little farther away. Depending on the treat will dictate how many times you can do this as well as how interested your rat is in the treat. You don't want to make it sick yet you want to leave it wanting more. For three it takes about 15-20 minutes anyway depending on how quickly the treat is eaten, face and paws are cleaned and the interest in another is gained. Eventually your rat will greet you at the cage door waiting for that treat.
5. At the time your rat starts to wait for you at the cage door for a treat is when you can now leave the treat on the table off the door. Start where your rat can reach the treat while still standing on the door. Keep reading so it knows you are calm and not a threat but watch in your peripheral vision. This is a hard one for your rat. It is now venturing farther from its safety zone. Once you see it is ok with this distance, move the treat out enough where your rat will have to have at least one foot on the table to reach the treat. At this point your rat should be comfortable enough to eat it while it is on the door. Don't be surprised if it decides to start exploring the table. Also don't be surprised if at a movement you make it runs back inside the cage. This is where the importance of the table not being near anything it can jump to. Eventually your page turning won't spook your little one. And even better if your rat eats the treats on the table. Now you are ready to attempt a touch.
6. Once your rat is comfortable being on the table with you and maybe even inspecting your hands holding the book or even the book itself you know you are ready for a petting attempt. Get two treats (or more depending on how fast they get eaten) and put them near you before you open the door. Let your rat settle down and start the eating of the treats. Gently talk to it and try to pet it. If it has pink or Ruby eyes then your rat may have trouble seeing you as these colors of eyes seems to have poorer eyesight. You can tell if when your rat is looking your way it sways its

head back and forth. This is called parallaxing and they do it to figure out where you are. As your hand approaches for the pet watch your rat's reaction. Is it tensing? Has it stopped nibbling the treat and is frozen? If so, back off. Let it chew for a moment or more and try again. Each time you don't follow through lets it know you are not going to hurt it. Only try a few times to pet. You will know you are ready to really pet it when your rat starts to crawl over your hands to get to the book. Do not try to offer a treat in your hand just yet.

7. Once your little one lets you pet it quickly and it is totally comfortable outside of the cage and has no issues with you moving around then attempt to do a longer petting session. Once you have pet it everything else will come quickly as you have just taught your rat that in no way are you going to hurt it. It may even start to play with you.

With these tools in your toolkit on how to approach your rat and earn its trust you should be able to reform your biter.

Remember - let your rat lead and read its body language. We cannot communicate with them through our voice so you have to learn their language which is through body movements. Yes they can talk – and much of it is in a sound range humans cannot hear, but the body language is clear and once you learn it your fingers will be very thankful.

Congratulations on your decision at getting two rats at least. Remember they are pack animals and need cage mates to be completely happy. And thank you for loving your biter enough to try and reform it so it can learn what Love is. In doing that you will also learn what unconditional love is towards you.

Now for our success stories -

Tarzan's Taming

The story of a frightened rat becoming a loving heart rat

Tarzan came to live with us on 3/13/2013.

He was brought to Best Friend Rodent Rescue by a gentleman who had been rescued Tarzan out of (what we were first told) a cat's mouth and who had no knowledge of rats. After the rescue he put him in a box by the front door thinking the rat wouldn't make it through the night. He looked it over to see what its wounds were without touching it. The man told us the rat's left eye had popped out, there was a deep gash on his left hind quarters and part of its tail was missing. It did make it through the night. He put it back out by the garage to see if it would scurry away into the safety of the bushes nearby. What amazed him was that his left eye was back in the eye socket. But the rat hadn't left the box by the late afternoon. He decided to get it a cage and other supplies. He brought it into his bathroom before he left to get the cage. He closed to bathroom door to keep his dogs out. When he got back he put the cage together and got the food ready. He brought it into the bathroom. He went to the box and lifted the towel to get the rat out and it wasn't there. The man said he panicked. He was afraid that maybe the rat got out under the bathroom door and his dogs got it. He looked everywhere. Then out of the corner of his eye he saw movement on the counter. Under some towels on the counter he found the little guy curled up, sleeping. He placed him in the cage and put him in a safe place away from his dogs. For two months he took care of this rat. No vet visit, but good food and water and cage cleaning. Then he decided he just wasn't a rat person. So he brought it to BFRR.

Upon entering BFRR the rat, not named yet, starting huffing and puffing, fluffing up and jumping up against the cage bars.



He obviously smelled the other rats and it upset him. The gentleman said he never acted this way with him. He was able to have the rat come out and be on his shoulders. But then, the man had no other rodents in his home.

On March 2, I met this rat at BFRR. He would hiss and puff up and leap from one side of the cage to the other. Some of his movements concerned me. I noticed his eye was wet and took a photo with my big camera and was able to zoom in on his eye in the photo. Yes, it was weepy with porphyrin. I also noticed his tail tip, the part that had been de-gloved by the cat and had fallen off and healed on its own, looked a little pink. When Tarzan licked it, he whimpered. So it must hurt. And of course, that weepy eye looked smaller than the other. I mentioned this to Joanne and Joanne said she would add Tarzan to the list of ratties going to be neutered the next day.

But his hissing and running from one side of the cage to the other to get to either Joanne or myself was what prompted me to name him Tarzan. It was as if he was beating his little chest and swinging through the trees. It was so hard not to laugh at this behavior. It seemed the more we laughed the madder he got too. It was decided that after he healed up, he was going to go home with me. I am one of the ones who take in the troubles rats and work with them so they learn what love is. I took him in to meet my vet and to double check how his eye was doing.

On March 13th, I picked him up from BFRR. Joanne and I cleaned his cage together first. We found out quickly that he was very, very afraid of the leather gloves. He wouldn't even attempt to bite them. He just smelled them, backed away to a corner and cried out as if he was pleading for his little life. It was heart wrenching. We finally got him into a carrier and finished cleaning his big cage and got it packed up and ready to go.

We talked with Tarzan while he was in the carrier and Joanne put it on the sofa. She opened the door but he wouldn't approach her. She walked away a moment and I swooped in to make sure he wouldn't run off. I placed my hand gently on the sofa next to the carrier's opening. He got curious and started to sniff all around the doorway. Joanne came back and saw where my hand was. She made a comment that suggested I might want to move it. Then we both saw that Tarzan was right next to my hand and was smelling it. He made no move to bite it. He even tried to get past my hand. But eventually went back into his carrier by himself.

That did it. I was going to work with this little guy to get him to trust a human. I didn't know if he had ever had the experience of a human before since he had been outside, but I was determined to show him the love and trust he needed from me to be happy.

When I got him to my vet I told her about the eye popping out saying that was hard for me to believe. Yet there was something off about this eye as it seemed smaller than the right one. My vet seemed to think it could have been possible the eye had been forced

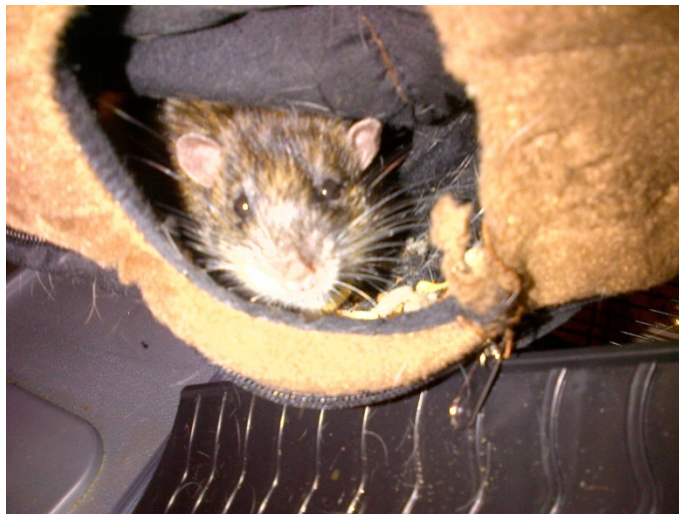
out and popped back in on its own and now it was in further in the socket that it should be. But other than removing it all together there was nothing she said could be done about it. Just to watch it and make sure it didn't get worse. As for his tail being de-gloved she said it didn't need any extra care. We could see a sharp tip was right under the skin that healed over it so she said we needed to watch it also just in case.

I got him to our house and put him in a room where there were no other rats, cats or dogs. I had many of my own. Some of my rats had been biters but with a lot of patience and time learned humans were ok. But for what needed to be done to gain his trust he needed to be in a room where there were not animals at all.

I set his cage up on a table and every time I got near the cage he stood and puffed out his fur and audibly did his huffing and puffing. He would race as fast as he could to the part of the cage I was fooling with and did his huff and puff routine.

I decided the way to start was to get him used to me and my voice. We had another rat named Cluny from Canada. He had been with a family and one of the other rats they had kept fighting with Cluny. One day they noticed he wouldn't open his left eye. They took him to the vet and found out the eye had been ruptured and needed removing. Many people who heard about it raised money for the surgery. After the surgery he was left with one good eye. The people at the rescue who took him in decided to name him Cluny after a character in the Redwall series. I had gotten the first book in this series and was waiting to read it. Now was going to be a good time since I could read it out loud to Tarzan which would get him used to my voice.

At first all he did was the huff and puff and stay as far from me as he could.



Or he would pace back and forth if I was too close to the cage. I started to take scraps of fabric and slept with them to get them infused with my smell. I placed these daily

into his cage with him. At first he got mad at them and shred them to pieces. Slowly over time he stopped doing that only to start dragging them to an area away from him.

After I had read quite a few chapters over a week's time, he started to come down to the second level to huff and puff. He still stayed towards the back of the cage but he was getting curious and every now and then approached me. As long as I didn't look at him he would stay close and look me over. I noticed he started to drag the scraps of fabric I was putting in his cage to the bottom corner closest to me.

I sat close to the cage now so he could smell me. I watched his body language to tell me if I was getting too close for his comfort zone and slid my chair away until he relaxed a little. Finally, he started to come down to the bottom level of the cage to the corner closest to me. He had been with me for about 3 weeks. If I made any attempt to get close or put my hand near the cage he would huff and puff. I started to sit as close as I could to the cage now with my arm almost touching it holding the book. I could see him sniff me from time to time when I started a reading session. Then after a while he settled down to listen cuddled up in the fabric he was bringing there. Now every now and then I would look towards him and talk to him about the story.



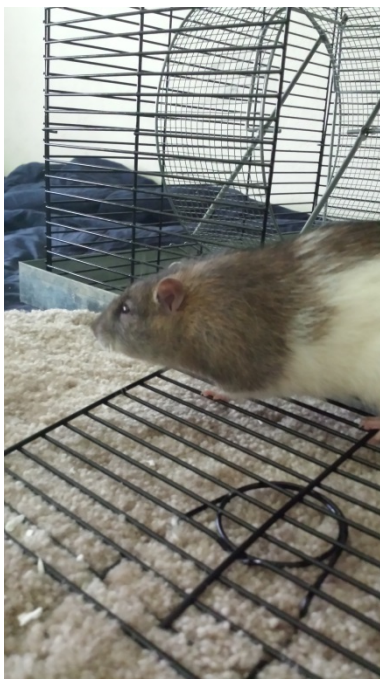
"Wow, I didn't know Cluny was a bad character in the story. That certainly doesn't fit our Cluny's personality from what I am hearing."

One day, as I talked with him, he squeaked back at me. I thought I had scared him. But I tried another sentence and again he talked back to me. For the next week this continued. It was like we were actually carrying on a conversation. But I, unfortunately, had no idea what we were saying to each other. I also noticed a change in his behavior. He no longer huffed and puffed at me but almost excitedly scurried to that bottom corner waiting for me to talk to him. As he talked to me he curled up in the bottom

corner of the cage looking so sad but cute. What was he telling me? Was I frightening him? Was this way of him trying to communicate to me? I wish I could speak Rat.

Now was the time to take the next step. I got a new rubber backed bath mat that had no smells of anything else. I laid it on the rest of the table the cage didn't cover. The rubber backing would keep it from slipping around and the rug would make for good traction on the table and more appealing to those little feet. Once the rug was in place and I had read a while and he seemed relaxed, I reached over and opened his cage door letting it lay down on the table to act as a ramp. This startled Tarzan so much. He looked so confused. He didn't know how to react. It took him a couple of days to make the brave decision of trying to come out and explore. When he was out I quickly learned I had to make no movements or he would race back inside his cage and stare at me like I was out to get him and he just got away. I left treats for him on the door at first to help him learn this was ok to do.

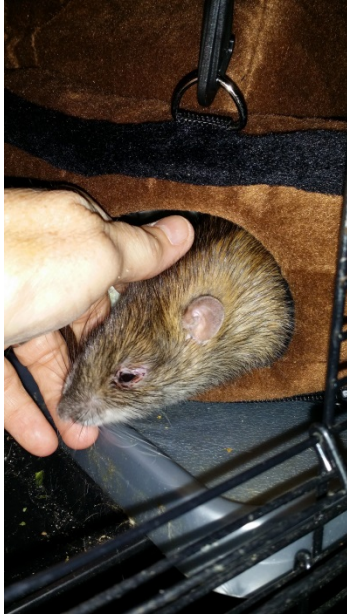
As time went on, he looked for me to come to the cage and open the door. I would start reading and he would come out and explore. He would even come over and smell my hands. When he did this I stopped talking, mostly for the anticipation of getting bit. But he never did because I stayed still. This went on for a while and more and more I noticed a change in how relaxed he was. When he sniffed my hands then I didn't stop reading and I was no longer afraid of moving them. I was even able to pet him now while he was either eating a treat or sniffing the book.



One day he was hesitant to come out. He was huddled in the bottom corner of the cage. I decided to see if he was cage aggressive and reached in to pet him. He pushed his head into my hand and waited for me to give him the back rubs he was getting used to. He got so excited that he actually started to roll around like a cat does when you pet them. So now I could even pet his tummy. What a silly boy. That did it. He crept into my heart to remain there for always. A Heart rat was born.

I had been cleaning cages and I had pet other boy and girl rats. Usually I wash my hands before playing with Tarzan because I wasn't sure how he would react to the smells of another boy. But that day I forgot to wash my hands and Tarzan spent the next few minutes using his paws to make me turn my hands over and move my fingers so he could smell every part of my hand. Then when he was done with that he would start licking my hand as if to clean it for me.

Then one day he added the preening nibbles as if I was another rat. That tickles and is fascinating to watch. He has done this to me ever since, especially the licking.



Once he got used to me and I was now free to hold him I was able to see the damage the dog did to him. We had first been told it was a cat that did the damage to him but later found out from a friend of the man that rescued Tarzan that it had been his own dog and he felt very guilty about what happened. He shouldn't have as his dog was just doing what comes naturally but I am glad he intervened.

His injuries must have been severe. The left eye was indeed now smaller but he could see out of it. The tip of his tail was irritated for sure by the tip of the bone inside that must be pressing on the skin covering it. And his back left leg has the definite evidence of scar tissue in the muscle of his leg which is causing him to walk funny. It didn't seem to hurt him when he was younger but now as an old man his leg has become almost useless. He loves his nightly couple of hours of quiet

time in the Boncho (Bonding poncho) with me at night. He gets love and gives love and then settles down resting while he gets scritchies. What a change from when I first met him. Everything we went through together to get to this point was so very worth it.



Romeo – Our First Biter

Got on 8/18/2006

Our youngest daughter wanted another rat. We had been told a local rescue had been left many at their door in two fish tanks, one for boys and one for girls. Something like 40-50 in both so each tank was pretty full. So we went to look.

She chose a big boy. He was giving kisses to her. The boys had been housed together in a small cage but he stood out. We completed the adoption and purchased some food from the rescue too.

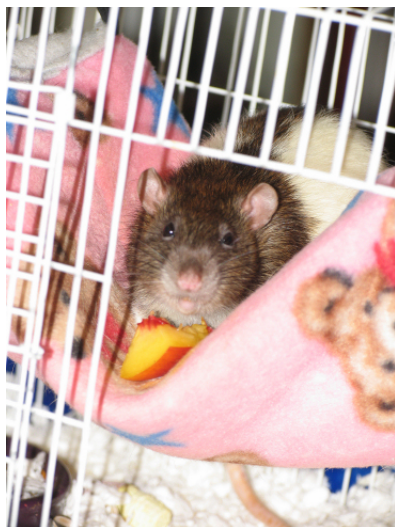
All the way home he was wonderful and gave kisses to Jessica. She named him Romeo because he was such a loverboy. Once home and in his own cage it was if someone flicked a switch and no longer was there a cute loving boy, but a big mean guy who whenever we opened his cage door he rushed it to bite us. I took him from my daughter to protect her and work with him. I had never had a biter before.

I started to do research on the web. There wasn't much out there at this time. Not like there is now. But I found some things. Some I agreed with and some I didn't. I used some of it to try.

I started with old T-shirts. I had quite a few and would wear them overnight to gain my smell. The next morning I quickly placed them in his cage. He attacked them. After a while he stopped.

At this stage I started to put his cage on the bed and talked to him. He would jump around a fluff up his fur. The only thing I could think of that turned him this way was that he had been housed with many rats at a time and had to fight for food and a place to sleep, even longer than just the trip to the rescue. Now he was in his own cage and most likely felt he had to defend his turf.

I didn't know then about neutering. If I had I bet his rehabilitation would have taken less time since his history wasn't a traumatic one.



With the defending of his turf in mind I decided it was time to open his cage door when it was on the bed to let him approach me. When I did that I was able to pet him and he was fine. Once back in his own cage I couldn't attempt to go near him, at least not yet.

After two months of talking with him, letting him come to me, using the t-shirts, offering treats closer and closer to his cage and finally inside his cage he came around. He learned that inside his cage and out he was not going to be threatened or have to fight for food. He learned what back scratches were loved them. And most of all – he learned to give kisses again. He became our Romeo again as he was when we first met him.

PuppyJack
Arrived on 1/15/2011

PuppyJack



I got an email from a fellow rat group member, Hilary. She asked me if I would I be able to save a little boy rat from a lonely life she asked? Just that call alone is enough for me to think about adding to my gang but hearing more of his story made it certain he would be coming to live with us.

It seems this little guy was labeled a biter. Hilary said, even though she herself hadn't been bitten, his history made it so he wouldn't be able to be homed with just anyone. Since I have had biters previously and have successfully turned them back into loving boys and girls they really were deep down inside, would I be able to take Puppy? He has already been in three homes and was almost snake food in another. He even bit the person who was attempting to make him the snake's next meal. Now, if I were a rat - I would certainly bite that person too, wouldn't you?

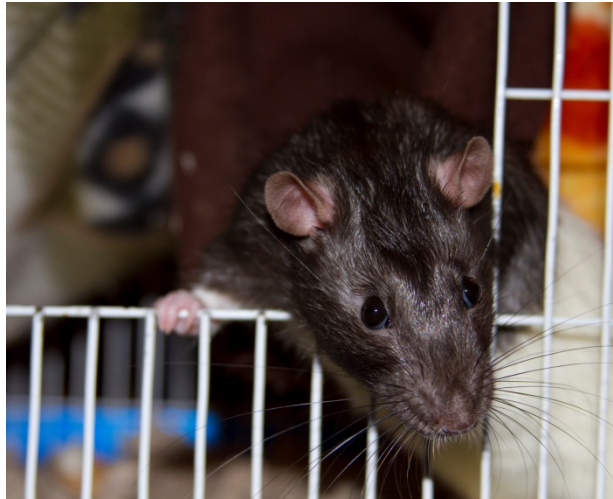
We met at a convenient place between us. I talked with him for a while before we transferred Puppy to the cage I brought with me. I had forgotten to remove the plastic bag from the food bowl so I reached in and pulled off the plastic bag. I could feel Hilary tense as she stood next to me and she said I was brave at doing that. I didn't think - I just did it. Puppy made no moves towards me and that surprised Hilary. She said then that she knew I was the right person for him. She told me his name came from a little girl in one of the previous homes he was in.

I put Puppy in my car and off we went.

I let him get used to the new surroundings and talked with him many times a day, every day for a week. I added food to his bowl and provided clean water. He got treats when he showed good intentions towards me. If he looked like he was on guard, I didn't give him a treat but talked with him until he relaxed. Then he would get one. Being very food oriented this worked very well.

When I felt he was getting used to me, I pushed his cage back from the edge of the table giving him room to come out on his own. I put a yogi on the table to entice him. It is funny how far a rat can stretch making sure his back feet are always attached to the doorway of the cage for a quick

getaway. I had to laugh when I continued to offer a yogi farther and farther from the cage door only to watch this rat grow in length right before my eyes as he stretched out longer and longer each time to reach it. Finally, I got it to the point where he had to get all four feet on the table. By that time he seemed to be comfortable enough for me to pet him and when I did, it was just once. He turned around and was running back into the cage in a flash. But he turned around quickly and was at the cage door looking at me as if checking to see if I was chasing him. I just sat there and talked to him telling him he was silly.



We kept this up for a few days and he finally was settled enough where he would come straight out onto the table as soon as I opened the cage door. Now he would let me touch him longer. I pet him more and more. Soon I would try to pick him up. I also decided, and Puppy seemed to agree, that his name should be changed to PuppyJack. He didn't seem to want to answer to Puppy or Jack but he answered to PuppyJack.

Later I finally found out more about PuppyJack's past. It seems he bit at least three different people very badly. They weren't just little nips - they were true bites. I asked about the circumstances of why he bit. After hearing them, I came to the conclusion that he was scared. He had been near dogs and cats and that made him nervous. He was also around children that were loud. And as for the snake person - well, I am sure PuppyJack smelled the snakes too.

So, for now I decided I would keep our cats and dogs out of my office. I wanted to take away anything that would make him fearful. I wanted him to trust me and know that I love him and would protect him from all dangers.

This must have worked because he startled me one day. While he was out of his cage exploring, I turned partially away from him. All of a sudden I felt a rat jump onto my arm and scamper up to my shoulder. He snuggled in next to my neck looking all around at the room. Because he snuggled up next to me I knew I had gained his trust. He was looking at me as a protectorate. That felt good.

Since that day, we have made progress in leaps and bounds. I can now get him out of his cage when he is at his door. I no longer have to wait for him to come out of his cage. But, I am still a little cautious and if I don't take him out right away I don't attempt the reach in the cage method. He gets anxious and darts to the back of the cage and then back to the door. When he is out of the cage, he is more active but not nervous. I wear a jacket that zips shut and is tight at the hips to act as a pocket all around me. He loves to crawl inside and move all around and then poke his head out for a while to watch what I am doing.

Recently he has gotten brave enough to come out of my jacket and on to my desk. He helps me type before he goes off and explores the rest of the desk area. I have three large tables next to one another lining two walls of my office. This makes a great exploratory path for him. He is a clean boy and well behaved so I don't have to go behind him and clean up messes. He actually starts to get upset when he is out like he has to go to the bathroom and wants back into his cage. But his cage is on a separate table and so he has to wait for me to put him back. If I don't see him getting nervous he comes back to me and starts typing more for me knowing that will make me notice him and most likely put him back in his cage. He is so smart.



He has learned something else. We used to have a very fat rabbit named Dusty. Whenever you would go to pet her, she would flatten herself on the ground as if to make more of herself available to pet. We would laugh and kiddingly say, "How flat can a bunny get?" So in this fashion, PuppyJack does the same thing. I open the cage door, he comes running and pokes his head out. I pet the top of his head and he pulls it back inside the cage. I reach in and start to pet his back. That is when he flattens out - like Dusty did. So, "How flat can a rattie get?" is what we say now, laughing at him and remembering Dusty at the same time.

He has become a big part of our lives. We are so happy to have him.

Later I had a dream with him as the main character. When I woke I wrote it down and later turned it into a young adult's chapter story called "An Unexpected Hero". It was published in a magazine called, "It's a Rat's World" as chapters. Later, if we can find a good illustrator that will make PuppyJack as cute in ink as he was in life, then we will get his story published to share and possibly help turn people from the negative side of rats to how wonderful they are as pets.