

Taming a bearded dragon

Part I: The skittish baby

Case history #1

I got a bearded dragon because all the research I did showed me that bearded dragons were always "calm" and "friendly". Mine isn't!! My question: Is there any way I can gain his "love", so I can handle him? Anything you can do to help would be greatly appreciated!

In my experience, the procedures below help to gradually accustom a skittish BD to being handled, and to trusting his human. The main thing is to not give up and to keep interacting with him.

Ignore the aggression, and transform the interaction into a pleasant one.

- For instance, try turning the aggression into hunger. Always have greens in hand when putting your hands into his cage-- if he gapes, shove greens into her mouth.
- Bribery --mine accept wax-worms as lizard "candy". Yours may have other favorite treats.
- Try gently stroking her head as you hold her. She will likely close her eyes and become calm.

Support your baby, and reward good behavior

- Try picking him up by the tail, laying him in your hand, and holding him down with your thumb in a position where his mouth can't reach your hands. Hold him securely but *gently* despite his squirming.
- Do NOT put her down as long as she is squirming. She will think "If I squirm, they will let me go!!". Put her down only when she has stopped squirming and closed her mouth.

Supply security

- Does she feel insecure? Can she see something that might be frightening from her cage, particularly other dragons? If so, put up a visual barrier your baby can hide behind. A paper towel, nothing fancy, can help.
- Make sure your hands do not smell like anything threatening. Wash your hands well with a non-scented soap before you handle him (and, of course, afterwards as well!).
- Calm a squirming BD by covering her head gently with your hand. (Like, "Gee, everything went DARK mom!!").
- When you hold him, support his feet as well as his body. Dragons are naturally concerned about their spindly little limbs.
- Keep initial handling episodes short, and gradually increase their duration. Remember, she is very young, which means she is naturally going to be jumpy and full of energy.
- At first keep your hand in his cage, so if he slips out of your grasp, he doesn't fall, become and then suffer a terrifying chase around the room.
- Dragons often think that anything approaching them from *above* is a predator "RAPTOR!!! Runnnnnn!!! BITE it!!!!". Your hand should approach from a horizontal direction.

Socialize your dragon

- Talk to her.
- Keep him in an area with plenty of human activity.
- Some people leave their radio or their TV on for their dragon (animal planet?).

Persist

- Pick him up frequently.
- Interact with her every time you walk by the cage.
- Every time you feed him, touch his head gently with your index finger.
- Go for small steps forward- any progress is better than none or than backsliding

Be patient

- Your baby is young, it has only met you recently, you are HUGE and she has hardly had time to bond with you. She may sense your frustration, feel uneasy, and will puff and squirm in response.
- Trust takes time to establish but can be earned by being patient and putting in time with her.

React to the behavior that the dragons shows

- Does he run away? If so, slowly follow him with your hand (don't startle him), coming in from the side rather than from above, and keep trying. It may take awhile before he decides to sit still long enough to be picked up.
- Is she struggling after you pick her up? Let her struggle and don't let go. Don't squish her, but let her crawl out of one hand only to be transferred into the other. She'll probably keep this up for a minute or two and eventually she'll calm down. Keep holding her for a few minutes after she calms down and then put her back.
- Only put him back when he is calm. If he starts struggling again, keep holding him until he chills out. You don't want to enforce the idea that "struggling" = "freedom".
- Note that she might squirm a bit right at the moment you put her down - let her get away with this one. She sees the ground approaching and instinctually wants to grasp for it. Instead, she is just as likely to cling to you when you try to put her down. My little ones do this - they struggle like mad when I pick them up and then they don't want to be put down! Schizophrenics.

Case history #2

- All of my hatchlings were incredibly speedy at running away when approached and also tried to bite when approached too closely. It is really hilarious to see a tiny speck of a dragon trying to bite you! After a week or so, when they realized that I wasn't going to eat them, but instead was actually the bearer of yummy crickets, they really calmed down.

Case history #3

- You emailed me awhile back re ways to deal with my beardie who is VERY aggressive and likes to bite. Just wanted to say thanks and share that he is now becoming a REAL sweetie, all in a matter of two weeks! I realized I picked him up TOO suddenly and quickly when I put my hand in the enclosure (opening from above) and i never supported him from underneath when i picked him up which i do now, AND especially important, i started throwing greens and supers into his mouth when he gaped at me angrily. He would get SO SHOCKED when i did that, and eat what was in his mouth with surprise. I think this tactic FINALLY made him realize that my hands are friendly and not evil.....anyway, we are starting a nice friendly relationship now.

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