

THE UNIVERSAL MONITOR LIZARD SOCIALIZATION ENCYCLOPEDIA

A Comprehensive Trust-Based Strategy for All Varanid Species

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So, You Just Bought a Baby Monitor...

Congratulations! You've just brought home one of the most intelligent, prehistoric, and rewarding animals in the reptile world. Whether it's a tiny Ackie or a high-strung Lace Monitor hatchling, you are likely feeling a mix of excitement and a little bit of "what now?"

Right now, your baby monitor doesn't see you as a friend; they see you as a giant, 50-foot tall predator that is going to eat them. Their instincts are telling them to hide, hiss, and survive. Your job over the coming months is to prove those instincts wrong. This guide isn't about "breaking" the animal or forcing them to submit; it's about building a bridge of communication. If you follow these steps with patience, you won't just have a pet in a glass box—you'll have a companion that chooses to watch TikTok on your shoulder!

The Golden Rule of Socialization

Before beginning this journey, you must accept one truth: **Every animal is unique.** There is no fixed calendar for trust. You might move from Phase 1 to Phase 2 in a single week, or it might take months. We work at the **animal's pace, not yours.** For extremely skittish monitors, you must move in tiny, incremental baby steps. If you try to rush the process, you will cause a major setback. Patience is your most powerful tool; let the lizard dictate the speed of progress.

PHASE 0: THE ENVIRONMENTAL FOUNDATION

The enclosure is the physical classroom where socialization happens. If the environment is designed to allow the lizard to stay in a primitive "fear-loop," you will never achieve a true bond. Many keepers mistakenly believe that a nervous lizard needs a cage packed with fake plants to feel safe; however, for an intelligent predator like a monitor, this "clutter" often acts as a wall that prevents them from ever processing your presence, in my experience anyway. There is many ways to socialise a monitor but this method is the best way I have experienced with my monitors.

1. ENCLOSURE PLACEMENT

To maximize the success of a trust-based socialization strategy, the physical location of the enclosure within your home is just as critical as the internal layout. You should place the enclosure in a **high-activity area**, such as a living room, a busy bedroom, or a main hallway.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF EXPOSURE

Monitors are highly intelligent, visual hunters that constantly scan their environment for threats. If you tuck the enclosure away in a "reptile room" or a quiet spare office, you



are inadvertently keeping the lizard in a bubble of isolation. When you eventually do enter that quiet room, your arrival becomes a high-intensity, "scary" event because the lizard hasn't seen a human for hours.

By placing the enclosure in the heart of the home, you provide **constant, low-level visual exposure**. This is the fastest way to achieve "habituation"—the process where the brain learns to ignore repetitive, non-threatening stimuli. In a busy living room, the lizard observes you walking past, watching TV, or talking. Because these movements never result in an attack, the monitor's nervous system eventually stops categorizing human movement as a "predatory event" and starts categorizing it as "background noise."

WHY QUIET AREAS STALL PROGRESS

If the enclosure is in a secluded spot, the method described in this guide will likely fail. In a quiet environment, the lizard's "alert threshold" remains extremely low. Every time a door opens or a floorboard creaks, it triggers a massive adrenaline spike because the lizard isn't used to sensory input.

In contrast, a monitor in a high-activity area becomes "street smart." They learn the difference between a person walking toward the enclosure (interaction) and a person simply walking past (neutral movement). This distinction is vital for **Phase 1**. Without daily exposure to people and household activity, the lizard will remain in a "feral" state of hyper-vigilance, making it nearly impossible to bridge the gap to choice-based interaction.



Figure 1 Minimalistic set up for a hatchling lace monitor. We added some fake plants in this one because of how open it was. The hollow log is open as you can see, so he also had a ground hide.

2. THE MINIMALIST ENCLOSURE PHILOSOPHY

The minimalist approach is designed to remove the "Invisibility Barrier." In a heavily decorated enclosure, a monitor can bask, hunt, and move while remaining completely unseen by the keeper. This allows the lizard to treat you as a "scary noise" or a "shadow" rather than a living being. By keeping the enclosure bare, you encourage the lizard to exist in the open where it can observe you.

A proper minimalist setup should include **one primary, secure hide**. This is an absolute sanctuary; it should be a place where they are 100% invisible and feel untouchable. Outside of this one hide, the enclosure

should be open. You must provide plenty of climbing branches, solid logs, and rocks to allow for natural movement and exercise, but you must avoid "filler" like silk plants, excessive leaf litter/branches/rocks. The goal is a layout where the lizard is visible to you, and more importantly, you are visible to the lizard.

3. THE "HOLLOW LOG" RULE

Hollow logs are excellent naturalistic hides because they provide a 360-degree sense of security. However, you must be careful not to provide too many of them. If a monitor has access to four or five different hollow logs, it will simply "log hop" from one to the other to avoid ever being seen.

By limiting the hollow logs to just one or two, you encourage the lizard to eventually choose to stay out on a basking branch. When the lizard realizes it can sit on a branch and watch you without being attacked, its brain begins to rewire itself. It moves from a "flight or fight" mentality to an observational one. This is the foundation of all future trust.

4. SCENT ACCOMPLIMENTATION (THE OLFACTORY HANDSHAKE)

Before physical interaction begins, you must introduce yourself to the monitor's primary sense: smell. Monitors "see" the world through their Jacobson's organ. To a monitor, a new human is an unknown chemical signature that could represent a predator. Scent acclimation allows you to introduce yourself without the threat of a moving body.

Place a piece of clothing you have worn for a full day (like a t-shirt or sock) into the enclosure, preferably near the entrance of their main hide. This encourages the lizard to flick its tongue and process your scent in a place where it feels completely safe. Over time, your "scent" becomes a standard, neutral part of its home territory. When you finally reach the stage of putting your hand in the cage, the lizard's brain will recognize your scent as "safe background info" rather than a "new threat."

5. THE BASKING "GREEN LIGHT" AND EYE CONTACT

The ultimate signal that a monitor is ready for the next phase is when it remains in a relaxed, sprawled-out basking posture while you are in the room. Basking is a vulnerable act; a lizard that stays on its rock while you are moving around has accepted that you are not a predator.

However, even at this stage, **eye contact can cause a major setback**. If you enter the room and lock eyes with a basking monitor, it triggers a "predatory lock-on" reflex. The lizard feels "spotted" and will likely bolt to its hide. You must learn to observe the lizard using your peripheral vision or by looking at its tail or feet. Never stare into the enclosure or into the lizard's hide. If the lizard feels that its "den" has been discovered by a staring predator, it may take weeks to feel safe in that spot again.

PHASE 1: THE TRUST-BUILDING PROCESS



Once the environment is set and the lizard has given you the "Green Light" by basking in your presence, you begin the linear process of desensitization.

STEP 1: PASSIVE PRESENCE (DESENSITIZATION)

This step is about becoming as boring as a piece of furniture. Spend 30 to 60 minutes every day simply sitting next to the enclosure. Do not attempt to touch the glass, do not talk to the lizard, and—most importantly—**do not look at the lizard**. Use this time to read a book or use your phone. This encourages the lizard to watch you while you are distracted. In the wild, predators do not "ignore" their prey; by being distracted, you are communicating to the monitor that you are not hunting it. If you feel the lizard watching you, resist the urge to look back. Any accidental eye contact during this phase can be seen as a threat and may cause the lizard to retreat, setting your progress back by days.

STEP 2: STATIONARY HAND ENTRY & INCREMENTAL PROXIMITY

Once the lizard is completely calm with you sitting outside the glass, you can begin introducing your hand. Open the enclosure door slowly and place your hand just inside the threshold. Do not move it toward the lizard. Keep your hand perfectly still for 10 to 15 minutes.

Over the following days and weeks, you will use "baby steps" to move your hand closer. Bit by bit, inch by inch, you will decrease the distance between your hand and the lizard. The goal is to reach a point where your hand is resting near the lizard without it flinching or reacting. Throughout this entire process, you must **keep your eyes averted**. If the lizard sees a hand getting closer while you are staring at it, it triggers a "pincer" fear—the idea that it is being targeted from two angles. Always look at the substrate or the corner of the cage.

STEP 3: CHOICE-BASED INTERACTION (THE BRIDGE)



This is the final stage of trust where you offer the lizard the choice to touch you. Open the door fully and rest your arm against the ledge, creating a "human ramp." Do not reach for the lizard; do not scoop it up. You are simply providing a warm, stable climbing surface and waiting for its curiosity to outweigh its fear.

Eye contact during this step is the most common cause of major setbacks. As the lizard approaches your arm, it is in a state of high alert. If you turn your

head and look it in the eye as it touches your skin, it will almost certainly freak out and bolt. You must stay as still as a statue and keep your gaze fixed on the floor or the wall. Avoid using cameras or phones to record this; the lens looks like a giant, unblinking eye and can be incredibly intimidating to a monitor. Let the lizard explore your arm and return to its cage on its own terms.

PHASE 2: NEUTRAL ROOM DESENSITIZATION

Once the monitor is comfortable climbing onto your hand and arm, you can move the socialization to a neutral, escape-proof environment. This is often the most transformative step for creating a truly "tame" companion.

1. PREPARING THE SPACE

Choose a small, secure room like a bathroom, laundry, or toilet. You must "monitor-proof" the area:

- **Seal the Exits:** Place towels at the bottom of the door and cover any drains or gaps under cabinets.
- **Remove Hazards:** Ensure there are no chemicals or tight spaces the lizard could wedge itself into.



Figure 2 Freckled Monitor juvenile that is calm and relaxed while on my hand

2. INTERACTION AND EXPLORATION

Sit on the floor and allow the lizard to climb off you and explore the room. By being in a neutral space, the lizard isn't defending a territory; it is simply exploring a new environment, with you as its only familiar "safe point."

- **Active Disinterest:** While the lizard walks over you or explores, stay occupied with your phone or a book. Watch TikTok, read, or scroll. This ensures you are not staring at the monitor, which encourages them to see you as a safe, non-threatening "climbing structure" rather than a predator.
- **Building the Bond:** Many monitors will eventually choose to climb up and sit on your shoulder to watch what you are doing. This shared time, where the lizard is free to move but chooses to be near you, is what builds a deep, permanent bond.

THE VISUAL BRIDGE: EYE CONTACT BABY STEPS

Eye contact is a major psychological trigger. In the animal kingdom, a direct stare is a predatory "lock-on." Just like moving your hand closer, you must move your gaze closer in baby steps.

- **Initial Phases:** You MUST NOT look at them directly. Keep your eyes on your phone, the floor, or the corner of the cage.
- **The Subtle Glance:** Once the lizard is comfortable walking on you, start with subtle, slow glances. Look at them for one second, then slowly look back at your phone. Do not "snap" your head toward them.
- **Increasing Duration:** Over time, increase the length of these glances. If the lizard flinches or becomes tense, stop and go back to averted eyes.
- **The Goal:** Eventually, you will be able to look directly at them whenever you want. By doing this slowly, you teach the lizard that your eyes aren't "targeting" them for a hunt, but are simply part of a friendly interaction.

ALTERNATIVE METHODOLOGY: THE FOOD-ASSOCIATION METHOD

⚠ EXTREME CAUTION ADVISED

While this guide focuses on Trust-Based Socialization, many keepers attempt to use the "Food-Association" method to speed up the taming process. It is important to

understand how this works and, more importantly, why it frequently fails or creates dangerous animals in the long term.

1. HOW THE METHOD IS PERFORMED

This method involves using a high-value treat (insects, egg, or meat) as a bribe to encourage the lizard to move toward the keeper.

- **Luring:** The keeper holds the food with tongs and lures the lizard out of its hide or onto a hand.
- **Hand-Feeding:** Eventually, the food is placed on a flat palm so the lizard must step onto the person to eat.
- **The Intent:** The goal is to teach the lizard that the human is a "provider" of positive things.

2. THE PSYCHOLOGICAL FALLACY

The biggest issue with this method is that it targets the Reflexive Brain, not the Social Brain.

- **Transactional vs. Relational:** In this scenario, the lizard is not choosing to be with you; it is tolerating you to get to the food. The moment the food is gone, the "bond" often vanishes, and the lizard may return to being defensive or flighty.
- **Hyper-Arousal:** Food triggers a "feeding frenzy" state in monitors. When a lizard is in this state, its ability to learn "trust" is overridden by its drive to strike. It is not learning that you are safe; it is learning that you are a walking vending machine.

3. THE DANGER: FOOD AGGRESSION AND "THE LUNGING REFLEX"

The most significant risk of this method—and the reason it is not recommended for species like Lace Monitors, Perenties, or even smaller, high-energy monitors—is the development of food aggression.

- **Targeting Eyes and Hands:** If a lizard associates your presence with food, it will begin to "lunge" the moment it sees you. Because monitors track movement and look for the "source" of food, they often target the keeper's hands or even their eyes.
- **The Door Charge:** Monitors trained this way often "charge" the enclosure door as soon as it opens. This makes routine maintenance, water changes, and cleaning incredibly stressful and dangerous.
- **The Test Bite:** A food-associated lizard is far more likely to "test bite" your fingers just to see if they are edible. While a test bite from an Ackie is a nuisance, a test bite from a 5-foot Lace Monitor can result in a trip to the hospital.

READING BODY LANGUAGE: THE SILENT LANGUAGE

Understanding these signals allows you to adjust your speed. If you see a negative signal, you must freeze—do not move forward, but do not retreat immediately.

- **Slow Tongue Flick:** This is a sign of calm processing. The lizard is "smelling" you and deciding you are safe.
- **Pancaked Body:** The lizard is relaxed and soaking up heat. This is the ideal time for passive presence.
- **Gular (Throat) Puffing and Hissing:** This is a defensive warning. The lizard feels threatened. **Avert your eyes immediately** and stay still until the puffing stops.
- **Fixed Stare:** If the lizard is staring at you, it feels hunted. Look away to break the tension.
- **Heavy Side Heaving:** The lizard is stressed and its adrenaline is spiking. Stop all movement and wait for its breathing to return to normal.



Figure 4 This young lace monitor was getting used to me giving him chin scratches. He had his throat puffed abit but not fully. This means that he was defensive, but not enough for me to stop and back away. So I just stayed still and let him calm down.

Figure 3 This was his first time on my arm, and he clearly wasn't impressed. Between the high posture, direct eye contact, and puffed-out throat, he was showing classic signs of defensiveness and uncertainty. To help him settle, I raised my hand above my head. Because semi-arboreal and arboreal monitors feel more secure at a height, this immediate change of elevation made him feel safe. Once he calmed down, I was able to slowly bring my hand back down



The "Closing Eyes" Distinction

Eye-closing must be read in context with the rest of the body. If the lizard's muscles are **tense and rigid** and it closes its eyes, it is in a "Shutdown Response." It is terrified and trying to block you out. You must stop the interaction and avert your eyes. However, if the body is **soft and pancaked** and the lizard slowly closes its eyes, it is a "Trust Response." It feels secure enough to sleep in your presence. This is the ultimate goal of socialization.

TROUBLESHOOTING & THE "NO-REACTION" RULE

Progress with monitors is rarely a straight line. You will have days where the lizard regresses and starts hiding again. When this happens, do not get frustrated; simply drop back to Step 1.

The "No-Reaction" Rule is the most important safety and training tool. If a lizard tastes or bites your hand, you must **not react**. Do not flinch, do not pull away, and—crucially—**do not look the lizard in the eyes during the bite**. If you react, the lizard learns that biting is a "power button" that makes you go away. By staying calm and looking away, you prove that the bite achieved nothing. For larger monitors, always wear heavy sleeves or gloves during early sessions so you can physically afford to maintain this "no-reaction" stance without injury.

FIELD NOTES: PERSONAL EXPERIENCE WITH DIFFERENT SPECIES

Applying these methods across different species shows that while the "steps" are the same, the "timing" varies.

BLACK-HEADED MONITORS/FRECKLED MONITORS (*VARANUS TRISTIS TRISTIS* & *VARANUS TRISTIS ORIENTALIS*)

These are an inherently skittish and high-strung species. When I worked with my *tristis*, I strictly followed the minimalist enclosure strategy. It required extreme patience; I spent weeks moving my hand mere inches at a time. There were periods where I couldn't even reach into the enclosure without him retreating.

However, by refusing to rush and sticking to the "No Eye Contact" and "Passive Presence" rules, the breakthrough eventually happened. It took about 8 months before I could comfortably pet or pick him up. By the time he was a yearling, he would spend hours in a neutral space with me, sitting on my shoulders while I went about my day. He remained a "nervous" individual, but because of the trust we built, he allowed and even sought out interaction.

MERTENS' WATER MONITORS (*VARANUS MERTENSI*)

We recently acquired a hatchling Mertens' that was completely unhandled. My 15-year-old sister is currently following this guide step-by-step under my mentorship. In under a month, the monitor has gained enough confidence to allow petting. This is proof that



these methods aren't just for "experts"—anyone with the discipline to follow the steps and respect the lizard's boundaries can achieve results.

ACKIE MONITORS (*VARANUS ACANTHURUS*)

Ackies are the most popular pet monitor for a reason: they are generally the easiest to socialize. However, because they are a smaller prey species, they are naturally inclined to hide in crevices. This is why Phase 0 is the most important step for an Ackie. By keeping the enclosure minimalist and not allowing them to "vanish" into infinite clutter, you bridge the gap much faster. While they often socialize quickly, never be discouraged if yours takes longer—every individual is a unique puzzle.

LACE MONITORS (*VARANUS VARIUS*)

Lace monitors are where the socialization process gets really interesting. Having worked with around 10 different individuals over the years, I've learned that there is no "one size fits all" approach. From my experience, they are very much like cats: they have distinct personalities, and they often choose their "person."

- **The Story of Fern and Rose:** I raised a pair of siblings, Fern and Rose, from the age of two months. Initially, they were housed together in a 4ft enclosure with two hides, branches, and a 3D background to utilize vertical space. While I applied the exact same steps to both, they responded completely differently. Rose became quite confident with handling, but Fern remained super defensive. Even during routine tasks like feeding or changing water, he would charge and bite.
- **The Turning Point and Regression:** During one session, Fern bit me significantly. While I followed the "No-Reaction" rule, I eventually had to cut the session short because the amount of blood was getting all over the enclosure. Rose watched this happen and learned a dangerous lesson: that a bite could end a session early. Shortly after, she began showing aggression that was very unlike her. I decided that splitting them into separate rooms where they couldn't see each other was the best option. While the move put Rose back to Phase 1, she eventually calmed down after a few months.
- **The "Connection" Factor (Fern):** Fern, however, never calmed down for me. He was habituated to my presence outside the glass and would eat from tongs, but he would always tail-whip or bite if I tried to get closer. By the time he was a yearling, I realized he simply didn't like me. When I sold him, he literally chose his next owner; he allowed a total stranger to pick him up without any aggression. A year later, when I boarded him, he recognized me and was calmer, but still huffed at me whenever I cleaned. The moment his owner returned, Fern climbed right up his arm. I never scared or hit him—we just didn't have that "connection," yet he became a perfectly tame lizard for someone else.
- **Daisy and Cyrus:** My current pair is a perfect testament to how rewarding a long-term bond can be. I have been a part of Daisy's life since she was only two weeks old; I visited her constantly until I finally brought her home from a friend when she was a year old. That lifelong connection has made her incredibly



placid and even "protective." I once saw her step directly between me and a defensive lizard in a nearby enclosure—an interaction she'd never had before. Whether she was truly shielding me or just reacting to the energy, it was amazing to witness.

- **Cyprus** is the other half of this duo, and he is a total gentle giant. I also acquired him when he was a year old, and he has grown into a big, dopey boy.

Despite being double Daisy's size, he is remarkably calm and gentle. Seeing the two of them together—one a tiny, watchful guardian and the other a large, mellow sweetheart—really highlights the unique personalities lizards can have.

- Because of the socialization work we did, they are both harness trained and go outside in the front and back yard (keeping in mind that in QLD, it is illegal to leave your property with a reptile unless going to the vet!).

- It's also worth noting that with large monitors, biting isn't the only risk. They have incredibly sharp claws, and even their normal walking or climbing can cause significant scratches



Figure 5

**Scratches after a handling session with Daisy.
If you don't want to get scratched, wear gloves.
I don't like wearing gloves with the reptiles so I just get scratched**

GREEN TREE MONITORS (*VARANUS PRASINUS*)

In my opinion, Green Tree Monitors are one of the easiest species to socialize. While many monitors are governed primarily by fear, *prasinus* are driven heavily by an intense, bird-like curiosity that helps them overcome that fear much faster than Laceys or *tristis*.

- **The Power of Curiosity:** Their high intelligence and active hunting style mean they are constantly scanning their environment. Once they realize you aren't a predator, their fear quickly flips into a desire to explore you.
- **Social Modeling in Action:** I saw this firsthand with my girls, **Fralon** and her sister **Saphira**. Fralon was extremely confident and progressed very fast. Saphira was the more nervous of the two, but she watched Fralon's every move. When Fralon would come out to explore me, Saphira would often follow her lead. She was still nervous, but she participated in socialization activities much more because she saw her sister doing it safely. This is a perfect example of how a confident "ambassador" lizard can help a shy one realize you aren't a threat.
- **Vertical Security:** Because they are arboreal, they feel safest when they are high up. In a minimalist setup with plenty of vertical branches, they will often sit at eye level and watch you with genuine interest. Just remember: even though they are curious and fast learners, those "**Eye Contact Baby Steps**" are still vital to prevent them from spooking.



Figure 6 Fralon the Green Tree Monitor as a young Hatchling getting used to my hand next to her

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQ)

1. I just bought my monitor today, when do I start socializing?

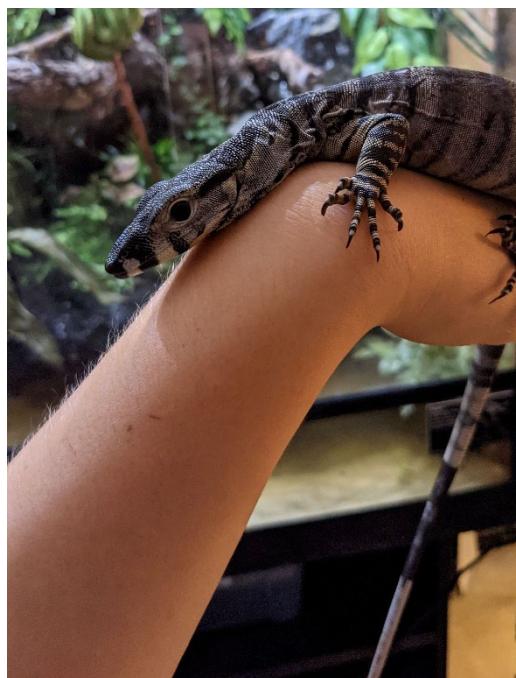
Generally, you should give them a "Settling-In" period of 7 to 14 days. Moving is a huge trauma, and they need to learn their new territory is safe. However, it depends entirely on the lizard. If the baby is very confident and is eating and basking within just a few days, then you can start Phase 1.

We only start when the lizard is basking, eating normally and without fear.

If they are still hiding and refusing food, wait.

Some monitors may never reach the stage where they feel comfortable taking food directly from tongs, especially in the beginning. You do not need tong-feeding to start the socialization process. As long as you notice that food is being eaten (even if they only eat when you aren't looking), you have the "green light" to start Phase 1.

Often, you will find that as the monitor progresses through the steps and becomes calmer with your presence, they may eventually choose to tong-feed on their own. However, even if they do, **DO NOT use food as a lure for interaction.** Let them eat because they are hungry and interact because they are curious; never confuse the two.



2. Can I use gloves while socializing?

Yes, especially with larger species like Lace Monitors. If wearing a glove is the only way you can successfully follow the **"No-Reaction Rule,"** then use one. However, try to use a glove that you have rubbed your scent on, or place the glove in the enclosure during Phase 0 so they don't see the glove itself as a new, scary predator.

3. My monitor keeps closing one eye when I'm near. Is he falling asleep?

Check the body tension! As mentioned in the "Closing Eyes" section, if the lizard is puffed up or tense, he is likely "shutting down" because he's overwhelmed. If he is pancaked and soft, he's dozing. If he's tense, avert your gaze and give him space; you are moving too fast.

4. How long should each session last?

Consistency is better than duration. 15–30 minutes of "Passive Presence" every single day is much more effective than a 3-hour session once a week. You want to be a predictable, daily part of their lives.

5. Why shouldn't I just grab him to show him I won't hurt him?

Grabbing a monitor triggers a "survival reflex." To a lizard, being grabbed feels like being caught by a hawk or a dingo. Even if you don't "hurt" them, the adrenaline spike and fear associated with being restrained will override any trust you've built. Choice-based interaction ensures they stay with you because they *want* to, not because they *have* to.

6. Is it okay to socialize multiple monitors together in the same space?

This depends entirely on the temperaments of the individual lizards. Socializing a pair can go one of two ways:

- **The Confidence Boost (Social Modeling):** If you have one monitor that is naturally bold and progressing well, and a second monitor that is simply shy or skittish, keeping them together can actually work to your advantage. The shy monitor will watch the confident one climb onto your arm or bask while you are near and think, "*If they aren't being eaten, maybe I'm safe too.*" The bold lizard essentially acts as a "safety ambassador," showing the shy one that you aren't a danger.
- **The Defensive Mirroring (The Risk):** As seen in the story of Fern and Rose, this ONLY works if the second lizard is shy, not defensive. If one monitor is actively aggressive or defensive (hissing, biting, charging), they can "poison" the progress of the other. Monitors are incredibly observant; if a calm lizard like Rose sees a defensive lizard like Fern bite you and realizes that the "bite" results in the session ending or the human leaving, they will quickly adopt that behavior.

The Rule of Thumb: If you notice one lizard's bad attitude is starting to rub off on the other, or if one is being "bullied" out of basking spots, split them up immediately. Socialization is much more effective when you can focus on each lizard's unique personality without the interference of a "bad influence."

7. My monitor only comes out when I'm not in the room. What now?

This is where **Phase 0 (Minimalist Setup)** and **High-Activity Placement** are crucial. If they have too many places to hide, they will never choose to face their fear. Ensure there is only one hide. Eventually, the need to bask and explore will outweigh their fear, and they will start staying out while you are there.

8. Can I use food to tame my monitor?

NOT RECOMMENDED. While it is tempting to use treats to "buy" a lizard's love, it almost always backfires. Using food targets the **Feeding Reflex**, not the **Social Brain**. When a monitor is in "food mode," they are in a state of high arousal and predatory focus.

- **The "Vending Machine" Problem:** If the primary reason your monitor interacts with you is food, you aren't building trust; you are building a transaction. The moment the food is gone, the lizard often reverts to its defensive, natural self.



- **Developing the Lunge:** Monitors track movement. If they associate your hands or your face with food, they will begin to "strike" at anything that moves when the door opens. They don't have the logic to distinguish your fingers from a pinky rat if they are in a feeding frenzy.
- **Eye Targeting:** Many monitors will actually target the keeper's eyes because they are shiny and move. If you have "tamed" your lizard with food, you are essentially training a powerful predator to lunge at your face the moment they see you. True socialization is based on **curiosity and security**, which creates a much safer and more consistent companion.

9. What should I do if my monitor bites me?

You must utilize the "No-Reaction Rule." This is the hardest but most important part of monitor ownership. If a lizard bites, "tastes," or latches onto you, **you must remain as still as a statue.**

The "Power Button" Theory: Monitors are incredibly smart. If they bite you and you flinch, shout, or immediately put them back in their cage and leave, you have just given them a "Power Button." They now know exactly how to make the giant scary human go away. They will use this "button" every single time they feel slightly inconvenienced, which leads to a permanently aggressive animal.

- **Breaking the Habit:** By not reacting, you are proving to the lizard that biting is a "broken button." It doesn't get them food, and it doesn't make you leave. When they realize that biting achieves absolutely nothing, they will eventually stop doing it.
- **Safety First:** For larger species like Lace Monitors, this is why we recommend wearing heavy denim or leather sleeves during the early phases of Phase 1 and 2. It is much easier to stay calm and not react when you know the teeth aren't hitting your actual skin. You must stay in the session until the lizard is calm, then end it on **your** terms. If the lizard runs away after you don't react, keep your hand there for a few more mins and then back away. If you aren't bleeding and have time, stay there longer. Sometimes you can still end on a positive note and the monitor might come out again.

10. My monitor hides the second I enter the room. Should I remove his only hide so he has to look at me?

NO. This is a common mistake that leads to "flooding"—a psychological term for forcing an animal to face a fear until it shuts down. While we want a minimalist enclosure, that **one primary hide** is their psychological safety net. If you take away their only sanctuary, you aren't building trust; you are causing trauma. The goal of the minimalist setup is to encourage them to *choose* to leave the hide, not to leave them with nowhere to go. If they are hiding 24/7, spend more time on Phase 1 (Passive Presence) outside the glass.

11. Is it okay to talk to my monitor while I'm socializing them?

Yes, but keep it low and consistent. Monitors have excellent hearing. If you use a calm, low, and consistent voice, it actually helps with the desensitization process. They will begin to associate the sound of your voice with the safety of your presence. However, avoid sudden loud noises or high-pitched "baby talk" early on, as these can mimic the sounds of a distressed animal and trigger a flight or predatory response.

12. What if I need to move the lizard for a vet visit or cage cleaning before they are tame?

Use a "Shift Box" or a thick towel. If you haven't reached the point of choice-based handling but *must* move the animal, avoid a high-speed chase with your bare hands. This will undo weeks of trust-building. Instead, encourage them into a plastic tub or a hollow log and cover the ends, or gently use a thick towel to scoop them up. By using an object (the tub or towel) instead of your hands, the lizard is less likely to associate the "scary grab" with your actual skin.

13. My monitor "huffs" and puffs his throat when I'm near, but doesn't run away. Is this progress?

It is a "Yellow Light." Puffing the throat (gular pumping) is a sign that the lizard is on high alert. If they aren't bolting, it means they are "standing their ground" and observing you. This is better than a lizard that is terrified and running, but it means they aren't relaxed yet. When you see this, stop moving closer, avert your eyes, and stay perfectly still until they take a deep breath and deflate. This teaches them that their "warning" was heard and that you aren't going to escalate.

14. Should I socialize them before or after feeding?

A: Ideally, a few hours after feeding. Socializing a hungry monitor is risky because they are in "search mode" for prey. Socializing them immediately after they eat can lead to regurgitation if they get stressed. The "sweet spot" is when they are well-heated and have started digesting. They are generally more lethargic and "content" during this time, making them more likely to accept your presence without a high-arousal response.

15. My monitor was doing so well, but today he hissed and ran away. What did I do wrong?

You likely did nothing wrong! Monitor lizard progress is almost never a straight line. Setbacks can be caused by an upcoming shed, a loud noise they heard earlier, or even a slight change in room temperature. When this happens, **do not force the interaction.** Simply drop back to Phase 0 or Step 1 for a few days. Respecting their "off days" actually builds more trust in the long run.

FINAL PRO-TIP: THE "POWER" OF TIKTOK AND SCROLLING

It sounds silly, but scrolling on your phone is one of the best socialization tools. It keeps your hands busy (preventing you from reaching out prematurely) and keeps your eyes down (preventing accidental predatory eye contact). It makes you look like a neutral, distracted animal—which is exactly how a monitor wants you to look!

PHASE 3: TARGET TRAINING (OPTIONAL)

Note: You **DO NOT** have to do target training. It is not a requirement for a tame lizard; it is simply an extra activity you can choose to do if you want to provide mental stimulation or make moving your lizard (to a scale or crate) easier.

Target training should only begin **after Phase 2**, once the lizard is completely comfortable in your presence and no longer views you as a threat. This creates a "functional" language between you and your monitor.

STEP 1: SELECTING YOUR TOOLS

- **The Consistent Target:** You **must** use the same target every single time so the lizard recognizes the "cue." A small, brightly colored ball on the end of a stick is the best tool for this. It is easy for the lizard to see and keeps your hands at a safe distance.
- **The Reward:** Use high-value, small treats (tiny pieces of insect or egg).
- **The Bridge:** Use a "clicker" or a specific verbal cue like "Good!" to mark the exact moment of success.

STEP 2: CHARGING THE TARGET (ASSOCIATION)

The goal is to teach the lizard: **Target = Reward**.

1. Present the target a few inches away.
2. The moment they look at it or move toward it, "Click" and immediately offer a small treat with tongs.
3. **Eye Contact Rule:** Keep your eyes focused on the **ball at the end of the stick**, not the lizard's eyes. This reduces pressure on the animal.

STEP 3: THE TOUCH

Once the lizard understands the target is interesting, wait for them to physically touch it.

1. Hold the target still and wait for the lizard to lean forward and touch it with their nose or tongue.
2. The second they make contact: **Click and Reward**.
3. Repeat this until the lizard seeks out the target the moment it appears.



STEP 4: FOLLOWING THE TARGET (LEAD TRAINING)

1. Move the target a few inches away so the lizard has to take steps to reach it.
2. Once they follow and touch: **Click and Reward.**
3. Gradually increase the distance to lead them across the room or back into their enclosure.

CRUCIAL TARGET TRAINING RULES

- **Individual Learning Speeds:** Every lizard learns at a different pace. **With my Lace Monitors, it only took two 10-minute sessions for them to fully understand the concept.** For some monitors, it may take significantly longer, and for others, it might click even faster.
- **Consistency is Key:** Never switch targets. That specific ball on the stick is their "work signal."
- **Session Length:** While 5 minutes is a good starting point, **you can do longer sessions depending on the lizard.** Some monitors are highly food-motivated and have a longer "attention span" for learning. If the lizard is focused and enjoying the "game," you can keep going. If they become distracted, end the session.
- **End on a Win:** Always end with a successful touch and a reward.

CONCLUSION: THE REWARD OF PATIENCE

Socializing a monitor lizard is one of the most challenging yet deeply rewarding experiences in the reptile hobby. Unlike many other reptiles that simply "tolerate" human presence, monitors have the cognitive capacity to recognize individuals, solve problems, and form genuine bonds of trust.



By following this guide, you have chosen the "hard road." It is much easier to force an animal into submission or bribe them with food, but those methods never result in the deep, complex connection you see in a "shoulder monitor." When you look back six months or a year from now and your monitor chooses to climb out of their enclosure to sit with you—without the need for a food bribe or a forced grip—you will know that every minute of averted eyes and "baby steps" was worth it.

Remember, **you aren't just a keeper; you are a partner in their environment.** Treat them with the respect their intelligence deserves, work at their pace, and you will have a prehistoric companion unlike any other.

Happy keeping!

