Training Your Ferret Not To Bite

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If you've owned ferrets, chances are you've heard someone say "I don't like ferrets, they bite and they're mean." This couldn't be further from the truth! Ferrets, especially kits, do nip when they play, but that's just how they interact with each other. Their skin is thicker than ours, and they don't realize that biting hurts. It is a ferret owner's job to train the ferret not to bite, and this can usually be done fairly easily as long as you have patience and the right techniques!

What methods can you use to discipline your ferret?

Obviously you will have to figure out what works best for your fuzzy, but here are some common techniques you can try.

Scruffing

This is the most common technique, and ferrets will almost immediately understand that they are being punished. It's how mothers carry their babies, so it clearly shows them that you are the dominant one! Just grasp your ferret by the looser skin on the back of his neck, lift him up to eye level and, while gently holding his mouth closed between your index finger and thumb, say "No" loudly and firmly. He may yawn or struggle a little when you scruff him, but don't worry – you aren't hurting him! You can add a drag at the end of this for ferrets that have dominance issues. After you say "No," gently drag the ferret on his back across the floor for about a foot or so. This will further reinforce that you are in charge!

Time Outs

If your ferret continues to bite, and you've attempted a scruff and a scruff and drag, a time out in his travel carrier is appropriate. Don't leave the ferret in time out for longer than 5 minutes, as after that time period, he's not going to understand why he's in there anyway. The time out method is especially helpful with kits. Since they are so energetic, they hate being locked up like that, and they will quickly associate biting with bad things.

Training Aids

Bitter tasting training aids such as Fooey and Chew Stop can be used in a couple of different ways. You can spray them directly on your hands or whatever the ferret is biting. Just be careful to keep your hands out of your mouth – these sprays really do taste awful! You can also spray some on a Q-Tip when you approach aggressive biters, and when they go to bite, stick the Q-Tip in their mouths and say "No bite!" Training aids will not work with all ferrets, as some ferrets seem to ignore the taste, so don't rely on training aids to do all the work for you. They are best used in conjunction with the time out method or the scruffing method. Never spray a training aid directly in a ferret's face. They are meant only to be sprayed on things.

Distraction

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This method works very well with kits who are just overexcited. When the ferret starts to bite your hands or your ankles, put a little FerreTone there so he starts licking instead. If it's during playtime and the ferret starts to get overly bitey, use a toy to distract him, and get him to attack the toy instead. It's not realistic to expect the ferret not to bite at all during play, but you can train your ferret to just nip (play bite) lightly or "mouth" at you (open his mouth wide, and kind of place his teeth around your hand or finger without actually biting down). Using toys are a good way to show your ferret what he can and can't bite.

Pushing your finger into the ferret's mouth

Note: This method should not be used as your main method. It should primarily be used when your ferret is biting you, and you cannot extract your finger from his teeth. When your ferret bites you, gently push your finger into his mouth and say "No, bad ferret" loudly but firmly as you do. This is an unpleasant feeling for them, and they will let go. When you feel him releasing your finger, stop pushing.

Most ferret owners use more than one of these methods to train their ferrets. Which combination of methods you use isn't nearly as important as how persistent you are in using it. It's vital to the training to be consistent in punishing bad biting behavior and in rewarding opportunities when the ferret had a chance to bite, but didn't. Failure to discipline the ferret every time he bites will confuse the ferret, and will either cause the training to take longer or will leave you with a ferret that isn't fully bite trained. On the flip side, it's equally important to reward the ferret for not biting by giving him treats, cuddling him, telling him he's good, etc. This will show him that not biting results in good things, while the bad biting behavior results in punishment.

What should you not do when training?

Never yell or scream at your ferret

A calm, firm tone of voice is the only way you're going to get through to him. If you yell and scream, you're just going to scare him, and he won't understand you anyway.

Never throw or hit your ferret

Violence isn't going to do anything but make him fear you, which will cause him to bite you more in an effort to defend himself and could very well result in a ferret that will always bite, despite training.

Never flick the ferret's nose

Some people have used this method, but it is not an effective way to train a ferret. Training methods should never cause your ferret pain, as that will make him fear you. Even if you just flick lightly, it's still going to hurt a little. You're trying to teach your ferret good behavior, not make him behave by fearing you!

Never try to punish a ferret after the fact

Unless the ferret is punished immediately after biting, he isn't going to understand what you're punishing him for. If you have children, teach them the correct ways to discipline a biter so they too can reinforce the training. If they are too young to understand what they need to do or how to handle the ferret, they should only be allowed to play with the ferret under your supervision.

Are there differences between training kits and adults?

Definitely! With kits, it's just a matter of training them not to bite because they don't know any better. Kits are fairly easy to train, and you will generally see results within 3 weeks. Additionally, they bite for different reasons than older ferrets – usually to get your attention for playtime or to make you put them down. Part of the bite training will be to teach the kit to be held without nipping. To break this behavior, you will have to hold the ferret (in a way that he can't bite you) for about 15 seconds. Praise him while you hold him, and don't put him down even if he squirms. Wait about 2 – 3 seconds after he stops squirming, then put him down and tell him how good he is.

Training adult ferrets not to bite is more complicated. Adult ferrets that bite do so because they were never properly socialized or handled enough as a young ferret. Unfortunately, this means that not only will you have to bite train the ferret, you will also have to teach him that humans are to be trusted, which can be difficult. You will also have to work against years of reinforced (or just ignored) bad behavior. Keep in mind that this behavior is not really their fault – they just never received the proper training. You will probably get some pretty rough bites while training an adult biter, but it's necessary that you have direct skin on fur contact so the ferret can get used to being held and handled. Because the ferret is already nervous and suspicious of you, it's even more important to be firm but gentle in your training methods. It will take longer than training a kit, but as long as you are patient and persistent, you will end up with a sweet, loving ferret, and usually one who is very bonded to you!

So what's the main thought behind all of this? Figure out what method works best for your ferret, kit or adult, and be consistent in your discipline. With patience and persistence, you'll have a properly trained and socialized little ferret in no time!

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