Behavior Problems and Solutions for Ferrets

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

There are a number of common ferret behavioral issues that you will probably run into as a ferret owner. These issues can become exasperating, but with a few easy tips, you can successfully rid your ferret of these bad habits.

PROBLEM

Biting

All ferrets nip as kits (when they are young). Ferrets have very thick skin, so when they play with each other, they bite hard. They will initially interact with humans the same way because they don't realize that it hurts us. It is your responsibility as a ferret owner to teach them how to play with humans. Here are a few methods you can use:

SOLUTIONS

Positive reinforcement

When your ferret plays with you without biting, reward her with a treat or praise.

Scruffing

When she bites, hold your ferret by her scruff (the loose skin on the back of her neck) and say "no" firmly, but without raising your voice. Scruffing is how her mother would curb unwanted behavior, and it doesn't hurt her. It just establishes you as the dominant ferret. You can add a short drag along the floor as well.

Time out

If the scruff doesn't work, put her in a cage or carrier for no more than five minutes.

Ignore her

When she bites hard during play, say "ow, no bite" without raising your voice, and then stop playing with her.

Hold her on the ground

When she gets too riled up, hold her gently but firmly against the ground until she stops biting, then release her.

Distract her

When she starts to bite, put a toy in front of her so she bites the toy instead, then praise her while she bites the toy.

Apply a bite deterrent spray to your hands, feet, or whatever she's biting. These sprays are bitter and will make her associate biting you with a nasty flavor in her mouth.

Put FerreTone on your hands

If you don't want to use a bite deterrent spray (there's always the possibility that you will get it in your mouth by accident, and it doesn't taste very good), put a small amount of FerreTone on the area that she's biting instead so she will lick instead of bite.

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The most effective training will incorporate a number of these methods, such as praising her when she plays without biting and scruffing or ignoring her when she does bite. She will quickly realize that no biting equals rewards and biting equals discipline.

It's important to note that the above methods are for use with regular biting issues. If your ferret is biting out of fear, you will need to avoid any methods of discipline and instead focus on positive reinforcement methods so she learns to trust you.

PROBLEM
Not using the litter box
Many ferrets will come to you already litter trained, but very few ferrets are going to hit the litter box 100% of the time. Here are three different litter box scenarios where you will need to do some training:

SOLUTIONS
Going outside the pan in the cage
In this situation, you would need to restrict your ferret to one level of the cage until the problem is resolved. Place the litter box in one corner, food and water bowls in the opposite corners, and cover the rest of the cage floor with bedding (blankets, sleep sacks, and other items). This will force her to use the litter box or relieve herself where she eats and sleeps, which most ferrets won't do.

Going next to the litter pan outside the cage
She may do this because the litter box is too full or it isn't big enough. If the litter box is clean, try using a different pan, and make sure she can fit all four feet in it comfortably. If the pan is big enough and clean, put down Piddle Pads® or newspaper around the pan and change it frequently.

Going in a corner or spot without a litter pan
Ferrets will generally choose their own corners to use, and the easiest thing you can do is put a litter box there. If it's in a spot where you can't put a litter box or don't want to, put Piddle Pads or newspaper down instead. If you would like to try and break her of using that corner, clean it thoroughly with a stain and odor remover that completely eliminates odors, such as Nature's Miracle, and put food and water dishes or bedding there.

Praise your ferret every time she uses the litter box in front of you, even if you have to pick her up and put her there. Positive reinforcement is the only way to successfully litter train a ferret. Never yell at a ferret that goes outside the litter pan or push her face into the mess. Simply pick up the solid waste, put it in the litter box, and clean the area thoroughly to eliminate any lingering odors.

PROBLEM
Digging
Ferrets like to dig, and they are going to do it somewhere. Like nipping as kits, digging is a natural, instinctual behavior. Many ferrets will dig in places that are unacceptable to their owners, such as at the carpet, in the litter box, and in the food bowl. There are things you can do to curb this behavior:

SOLUTIONS
Carpet digging
Many ferrets will dig in front of the door to the room or at the edge of furniture. Place a clear, plastic carpet runner in the problem areas.

Food bowl digging
Use a smaller bowl, so there isn't as much room for your ferret to fit her upper body in the bowl. Attach the bowl higher up on the cage so she can't get the leverage to dig as easily. Avoid gravity feeders that hold a lot of food, and don't fill the bowl you do use. Position a piece of bedding, carpet, or some other flat item to catch any food that she does dig out so it doesn't get wasted. Many ferrets will dig food out and then eat it off the floor.

Litter box digging
Don't clean the box completely; leave a small piece of stool and a few pieces of used litter in one corner. Ferrets who can't smell waste in a litter box will frequently dig in it. Try switching to a different kind of ferret litter.

With all of these issues, the methods listed above are only part of the solution. You absolutely must provide your ferret with a safe digging outlet, or both you and your ferret will end up very frustrated. Create a dig box for your ferret by taking a cardboard box or plastic bin and filling it with a safe digging material, such as biodegradable starch peanuts, rice, beans, ping pong balls, sand, dirt (without any chemicals in it), or shredded paper.

PROBLEM
Redecorating the cage
Ferrets are notorious for tipping over food and water bowls, moving litter boxes,

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and otherwise making a mess inside the cage. You can combat this by doing the following things:

SOLUTIONS

Attach food and water bowls and litter boxes to the cage

You can find a variety of food and water bowls that attach easily to the cage. This will prevent tipping or spilling and the subsequent mess. For a litter box, you can either use clips to hold your current litter box to the cage or purchase a Marshall Lock-On Litter Pan, which is made specifically to attach to the cage.

Provide more entertainment

Many ferrets rearrange their cages because they are bored. It is a common misconception that ferrets only use their cage for sleeping. But if there are fun toys for the ferret to play with, the ferret will spend less time sleeping and more time playing. Making your ferret's cage an interesting environment is very important to your ferret's overall health, as boredom can lead to depression which can actually result in your ferret getting physically ill.

PROBLEM

Biting the cage

Ferrets often bite the cage for the same reason that they rearrange the cage - they are bored. They may also bite and claw at the cage when they aren't getting enough time out of the cage. Ferrets should have at least four hours out of the cage each day, but the more time they're out, the happier they will be. Here are a few things you can do to stop cage biting behavior:

SOLUTIONS

More time out of the cage

Though four hours is the minimum amount of out of cage time your ferrets should get each day, some ferrets, especially young ferrets with lots of energy, will want more than that. If your ferret seems to be upset by the amount of time she spends in her cage, allow her to spend more time out. However, do not let her out of the cage when she is biting it, or she will think that you are rewarding her bad behavior.

Make the cage more entertaining

Place more toys in the cage, and rotate out the toys that are in there. Rearrange the bedding or the shelves to make the cage environment new and exciting.

Use a bite deterrent spray

You can spray a product like Fooey on the bars to prevent your ferret from biting them. Since the cage needs to be wiped down weekly, you would need to reapply the Fooey regularly. You can also use lemon juice as a bite deterrent.

Allow your ferrets to free roam when you are present

If your ferret's cage is in the same room that you spend a lot of your time in, it's not surprising that she would be upset to be cooped up in the cage while she can see you sitting on the couch a few feet away or lying in bed reading. Ferret proof the room the cage is in so she can spend all of her time out of the cage while you're in the room, and don't put her away until you're turning out the lights in that room.

Training a ferret is both easy and difficult - easy because ferrets are so intelligent and retain training well, and difficult because they can be stubborn and set in their ways. But with a little patience and effort combined with the right methods, you can effectively rid your ferret of unwanted behaviors.

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