

Ferret Can't Break The Biting Habit

A ferret is in danger of losing its home because it bites so often.

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Q: I have three ferrets — two will lick anyone to death but the third is a problem. She's a foxy girl that is 4 years old. I have had her since she was 6 weeks old and never got her out of the biting habit. One day I kissed her, and she split my bottom lip in half, which required four stitches. I don't know what to do, I am almost looking for a home for her because she doesn't just nip, she is just plain nasty. I love her to death, but it's difficult for her to play with my kids and her "brothers." I don't want to separate her from them either. She is the oldest of the three, the other ferrets are 2 and 3 years old. Is it still possible to get her out of this biting habit?

A: It is always possible to stop her biting, but first you need to identify three things — what is causing the biting, if it is being reinforced somehow, and what the current consequences are when she bites. In behavioral terms this is called ABC or Antecedent, Behavior and Consequences.

The hardest part with a ferret is trying to figure out what causes it to react in a way that it needs to bite. Consider the following for your ferret. Is she being startled by a noise or sudden movement? Is she afraid of being held? Does she like the squeal you make when she bites? Is something happening that she feels is a positive outcome? In other words, are you doing something she finds rewarding?

Once you find the trigger, alter her behavior by teaching her something else to do instead. If your ferret has learned to bite to get you to do something — put her down, squeal, whatever — then do not respond this way. If she is afraid, find a way to help her understand she is safe. To conquer her fear, start by hand-feeding her tasty treats or only petting her on her back.

Pay attention to what your ferret does right before she bites. Then pay attention to how she bites. Finally, pay attention to what you do when she bites to see if you might inadvertently encourage the biting. With patience and determination, you can teach her biting does not get her what she wants in life.