

Ferret Group Wars

Can two separate ferret play groups ever be blended if some ferrets are too terrified to interact with others?

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Q: I have eight ferrets and have to have two play groups with four ferrets in each. The reason is a little 1-year-old, female dark-eyed white (DEW), profoundly deaf, which we got from a pet store at the age of 13 weeks. She was the last one of my first group. She has bonded well with all of them.

I then took in two foster ferrets, both 2 years old (whom I've since adopted). The first night, they did well together. The next morning, the female foster decided to try to dominate my DEW, and promptly got the bejeebers beat out of her. After that, my DEW has absolutely refused to accept the new ones — either of them. She actually hunts them down to attack them, nonstop. I tried time-outs, scruffing, etc. After several days, it got to the point that the new ferrets refused to come out of their cage and shook constantly if I pulled them out. They were terrified.

I tried introducing her to a kit we got after (another deaf DEW, 5 months old when we got her), thinking she'd be more likely to accept a kit. No go.

I'd love to blend them into one large group, but the new ones are terrified of any from my original group. Is it possible to ever blend the groups? I've had the first ones for about a year, the second group for six months.

A: While I truly believe that given enough time and space all ferrets can learn to get along, in your case the stress may be too important to ignore.

If you wish, you could try mixing up the groups as much as possible so that all of the ferrets, except the troublemaker, get to spend time together and get used to each other. Continue to monitor stress levels and don't give up, but if you notice that any ferret is too stressed to come out or to interact at all, even with unfamiliar ferrets, then resume a two-group system.

If the other ferrets all get to be comfortable together, minus the DEW, it may be worth introducing all eight ferrets at the same time. Again, you must stop the process if any ferret is too stressed to attempt to interact at all.

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