

Methods To Combat Ferret Biting

Use these tips to control a nipping ferret.

By Kim Schilling

Not all bites should be considered an act of aggression. And not all bites warrant rehabilitation. The answer to a biting problem may be as simple as neutering your unaltered ferret or properly tending to a medical problem. You may need to remove a trigger or schedule play times around known triggers. More complex problems may involve extensive reconditioning.

Many things can be done to socialize chronic biters. Review and implement the nip-training tips in this article and give additional consideration to aggressive biters. One of your major goals is keeping both you and your ferret injury-free.

Handling

You cannot fix a biting problem without handling the ferret. Some people advocate the use of heavy leather gloves to prevent being bitten. While this immediate fix works for the human, I find that gloves only complicate the problem. You cannot be gentle with cumbersome gloves on. You may even ignore being bitten because the sensation is greatly reduced. This could actually give your ferret permission to bite your glove-covered skin.

To safely handle your biter without the use of gloves, distract your ferret and grab it by the scruff of the neck. Then with gentle, yet firm, hands, hold your ferret's upper body from underneath just above its chest. To keep control of its head and prevent biting, position your forefinger and thumb around the ferret's neck. Also, secure a paw between your forefinger and middle finger. The ferret cannot turn its head to bite you now. You're free to use your other hand to safely pet the ferret.

Done frequently, this gentle hold will allow the ferret time to see that humans aren't so bad. If you absolutely must, use a glove to capture a ferret but not to hold it.

Time Outs

Some people think a brief time out is a useless training technique on an animal that might lack a prolonged attention span. However, some ferrets respond to this method of discipline. Placing the ferret back in its cage shortly after a bite occurs, supposedly shows the ferret that you won't give it any attention or play time if it bites. Unfortunately, some ferrets don't want attention and being put back into a safe cage gives them exactly what they want.

Regardless of whether or not you try this method, remember that time outs should be brief — only a matter of minutes. You may go through the handling and time out sessions many times throughout the day.

If time outs don't work for you, try the opposite and hold the ferret no matter what. Some people find that wrapping the ferret up snugly in a towel and carrying it around all day is effective. No black and white answers exist in training. What works for one, may not work for another.

Show That You Are The Boss

Your alpha, or dominant, ferret may need to be firmly encouraged to step down a peg or two. Time outs and forced affection are both ways of asserting control. Some people growl or hiss at the biter to show strong disapproval of unacceptable behavior. Accompanied by a scruff and gentle shake, this method can be very effective. A scruff and shake may also make a ferret more upset, so be prepared in case this backfires on you.

Placing the ferret in a submissive position (on its back) and holding it there is another way of asserting dominance. Gently hold down the ferret above its chest to prevent it from curling up and biting you. Hold the ferret there firmly and safely for a minute or so before releasing it.

A common discipline method that rarely yields positive results is "nose flicking" the ferret immediately after it bites. I have yet to see a ferret that stopped biting as a result of being flicked on the nose. Nose flicking is commonly given advice, and usually makes matters worse. While it's not in the same league as throwing your ferret, it is aggressive physical discipline. Avoid using it.