

## Ferret Training Basics

### Ferret owners reveal their techniques for training success.

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The trick to training is that there is no trick. No single approach works with every ferret because each ferret is different. Ferret owners often use a mix of several techniques to achieve training success. "Consistency, patience and giving them what they want was how it worked," said Nicole Barcomb of New York. She gave them what they wanted by offering a choice of treat every time they did as she wished.

If you've got a ferret that needs to learn litter box etiquette or you want it to come when called, mix and match some of the following 10 techniques until you find the right method to train your pet to perfection.

#### 1) Use Repetition

It's true that doing the same thing over and over can be a bit boring, but it's also an excellent way to reinforce a desired behavior or discourage an unwanted one. This is how Heather Martin-Herron of Arkansas litter-trained her ferret. "I would place him in his litter box repeatedly after he woke up before he finally used it, then I would let him out," she said.

It's also a helpful technique when discouraging behavior. Alicia Mowry of New York stopped her ferrets from digging in the litter box for fun by saying the word "No" and giving a quick swat on their backside. Although it took a lot of repetition, she's happy with the outcome. "Now I can go into the room if I hear them, they look at me, I'll say 'No' and they will hop right out of the box."

Jason Hark of Massachusetts offered a helpful tip about training ferrets to come to the sound of their name through repetition. "Name them by very different sounding names," he said. "Fluffy and Muffy won't do. Mine are Spencer and Max."

#### 2) Be Consistent

During the weeks when a ferret is encouraged or discouraged from doing a behavior, you must be consistent in your actions to reinforce it. This applies not only to how you deal with the ferret, but to the environment as well.

Lisa Staffeldt of New York believes consistency was key to litter-training her ferrets. "Keep the litter pans in the same spot and use the same kind of litter. As soon as the ferret wakes up from a nap, into the litter box it goes until bathroom duties are done. [It] may try to get out but I will put the ferret back in the box until it has gone."

#### 3) Prompt Your Pet

Actions can speak louder than words at times, so some ferrets respond better if you show them what you want. Hark used this method when faced with a miss at the litter box. "Try putting their 'accident' in the pan, that usually shocks them into thinking they went to the bathroom there and that if it was a good idea then, maybe it's a good idea now."

Another trick that lends itself to prompting is roll over. "I started with him as a kit – physically rolling him over and saying 'roll over' when we were playing," Martin-Herron said. "Now, about six months later, he does it on his own when I say it."

#### 4) Be Patient

Patience alone usually won't help turn an out-of-control ferret into a well-trained pet, but it's often a key element to pair with another trait for training success. "In general, patience is the best general tip, as is requiring the behavior often – repetition," said Ailigh Vanderbush of Indiana.

Corey Wilson of Saskatchewan, Canada, trained his ferrets not to bite. "It was a sometimes painful procedure requiring a lot of patience and consistency on my part, with discipline that was meted out with stern, loud 'Nos' while scruffing their necks."

#### 5) Offer A Reward

For a ferret, a reward can be many things. And a reward can be powerful motivation for doing a behavior. Sally Arledge of Florida used praise and hugs to litter-train her ferrets. Jennifer Eckert of North Carolina rewards her ferrets with playtime outside the cage once they use the litter box. Martin-Herron relies on treats to reward her ferrets when they come to the

sound of a squeaky toy. Although Amanda Wood of Ohio used both treats and praise in training, she wondered if treats were necessary. "Really, it seems that our ferrets are just as encouraged by our acting really overjoyed as they are by treats, maybe even more so because they are not always in the mood for treats."

#### 6) Cater To Their Likes

Training a ferret to a task or behavior that it dislikes is certainly more of a challenge, so avoid this unless absolutely necessary. "As for the leash training, that all depends on the ferret what will work and what won't," said Deanna Penzkofer of Arizona. "It helps if you have one that likes to go outside."

#### 7) Build On Natural Behaviors

"The most important thing I found was to catch them doing natural behaviors that I liked and then reward them," said K. Ricke of Illinois. When she saw one of her ferrets rolling a stuffed ball with its feet, she gave him a treat and command. When he did it again, she again gave the command and treat. She believes he enjoyed getting a treat for something he was doing for fun.

Tammy Baxter of Pennsylvania walks her ferrets on leash with little trouble because she accepts that it's natural for them to stop and smell everything and wander around. They don't walk like little dogs and she doesn't expect to cover much ground when she walks them.

This attitude of accepting their natural behavior also helped Martin-Herron with her ferrets. "Once they realized that I would let them go wherever they wanted, they quit trying to escape the harness and enjoyed being outdoors."

#### 8) Learn From Your Ferret

Training isn't a one-way street. Several owners told us that their ferret had trained them. Nate Smith of Illinois said this about his ferret: "When she wants back in her cage, she will go a few inches from the piece of furniture it is on and look at it then look at me. She does this over and over until I pick her back up and put her in her cage. Whenever she wants water, she will go to the nearest sink and look up at the sink then me. The same routine she uses when she wants to be caged. She never fails at getting what she wants."

Kristen Elsey of Mississippi also takes cues from her ferrets. "They know when they play under blankets I will join right in and we have a blast. They know if they 'beg' with a pleading look, they will get some treats."

#### 9) Be Positive

For years now, positive reinforcement has been the buzzword for any type of training. The concept is simple – ignore unwanted behaviors and reward desired behaviors. This makes training a fun, positive experience. "Just remember to be patient, calm and positive even when they don't do what you want them to at first," said Cindy Michou of Alaska.

#### 10) Use Sound

The use of sound is a powerful training technique. It's also a key element to training a ferret to come when called/summoned. "One of the most important things to teach them is to come to you — in case one gets lost outside, can't be found in the house or starts heading toward a dangerous spot," said Bill Zodanga of Pennsylvania.

Whether you use the sound of a clicker, a squeaky toy, the rattle of treats in a can, or simply calling their name, any noise followed by a reward can usually be used to train a ferret. In addition, clicker training, because of its nearly instant reinforcement of a behavior, can be used to train other tricks, and many readers use voice commands to train their pets.

Obviously, sound isn't a help in the case of a deaf ferret, and it has one other drawback for ferrets that sleep like a rock. "They are then dead to the world and won't hear the squeaker," said Conny Weber of Indiana.