

## Why Ferrets Bite

**Explore 8 reasons why a ferret may bite and what to do about it.**

*By Kim Schilling*

Perhaps the most misunderstood and least talked about form of ferret communication is biting. For many ferret owners, denying that biting ferrets exist is easier and less damaging than explaining the biting phenomenon at all. The fear that the ferret's image may be tarnished or further blemished often keeps the subject of biting tightly under wraps. So why is it that Fido and Tabby are allowed their less-than-perfect moments? All animals, domesticated or wild, will bite under the right circumstances. Although pet owners discourage biting, it is a basic way of communicating for all animals, including man. That said, a ferret that bites aggressively is more the exception than the rule. Preventing and/or managing ferret biting results from understanding your ferret's needs and behavior, and making a commitment to properly address both.

### Why Ferrets Bite

Differentiating between nipping and biting may seem like splitting hairs, but the difference is distressingly clear if you experience it. Aggressive bites are painfully hard and frequently draw blood. At minimum, an aggressive bite will leave several impressive indentations in your skin. Bruising around the area may result shortly thereafter.

Before a ferret bites there may or may not be some telltale warnings, such as a puffed tail or sharp hiss. The worst offender may clench down on you and stubbornly refuse to let go. What could cause such an act of audacity? Many possible reasons exist.

**Kits Will Be Kits:** All baby ferrets, known as kits, tend to nip. They explore their environment using their mouths in order to learn about the things around them. Also, nothing soothes the pain of teething like gnawing on a chair leg — or your pinkie finger. So if your "biter" is a kit, it likely isn't a true biter. Yet.

At this critical stage of physical and emotional growth, caretakers need to supervise and properly guide ferrets. What you do or don't do early on determines your ferret's behavior as an adult. You must properly socialize and train your ferret.

Training begins with you. Think before you act. Using your hands to roughhouse with your new ferret may seem like a fun and entertaining bonding experience. However, encouraging play biting with your kit only sends mixed messages. If you sometimes allow biting, how is your ferret supposed to know when it is or isn't OK to bite? Guide your pet with patience and consistency from the beginning, letting it know that biting in any manner is unacceptable.

**Spoiled Rotten:** Remember that cute little ferret kit you used to roll around with your hand? Well, its teeth are bigger, and its bite much harder. Your ferret now wants to roll you around — but with its teeth. This ferret probably doesn't understand the concept of "No," or the fact that you have a pain threshold. And even if it did, this ferret probably wouldn't care. Such innocent-nippers-turned-bold-biters may be the result of failure to nip train early. Unknowingly rewarding the ferret for nipping may also be to blame.

**Trigger Happy:** Ferrets can have pet peeves that cause their bite behavior. Sometimes the cause (trigger) jumps right out at you. If your ferret attacks your feet only when you're vacuuming, the vacuum is a trigger. Or perhaps your ferret chases the same skittish person around the living room every time he or she visits. A strange odor could cause a particular ferret to lose it. A sound can even be the culprit. I had a sweet ferret named Sybil that attacked me whenever she heard dogs barking.

Many ferrets eventually become desensitized to the trigger. But some ferrets may never shake their peculiarity. If that's the case, learn to live around it by avoiding the trigger.

**Physically Challenged:** The worst ferret bite I ever received was from my loving ferret Bernie. Had I figured out sooner that Bernie had gone blind, I wouldn't have grabbed him without first getting his attention with my voice. Instead I startled him, and he bit me.

To avoid this situation yourself, talk to your blind ferret and let it know you're there. Deaf ferrets respond to smells, visual stimuli and even vibration. Also consider other health issues as a reason for aggression. A ferret sick with the flu or in serious pain might bite with little provocation. Have a veterinarian rule out underlying medical conditions for any ferret that bites consistently or uncharacteristically.

**The Dominator:** There's one in every business (group of ferrets). An exceptionally dominant ferret will try to dominate both its human and fellow ferrets. Increased hormones make unaltered males prone to such bullying. However, either gender may suffer from this condition, whether altered or not. Dominators don't have to be big to be bad, and biting is one of their favorite ways to communicate. What better way to say, "I'm bad to the bone, so don't mess with me," than with a firm bite? Some ferrets that fall into this category may also be considered spoiled rotten.

**The Self-Protector:** This ferret has suffered a tough life. It's been conditioned during months and years to equate humans with pain. Sadly, there are many ferrets that have been repeatedly hit, kicked or even thrown. Many survive even greater atrocities. The self-protector lives in survival mode. The bite of this ferret has a clear message — attack or be attacked. While most abused ferrets bounce back and learn to trust again, a few never shake their fear and mistrust.

**The Sensitive Soul:** Change, good or bad, is scary. It can cause fear, confusion and lots of stress. Even people need time to adjust and adapt to new things. Ferrets are no different. Most take change in stride, hardly missing a beat. Others are more sensitive to change. The latter may react aggressively in an unfamiliar environment, and show displeasure by biting the nearest person or ferret.

Ferrets that have just been engaged in aggressive behavior with another ferret or pet also go in this category. Personal experience taught me that offering a comforting cuddle to a ferret that had just been attacked by another ferret wasn't the best possible action. The scars on my chin attest to a ferret's need for space after enduring such stress.

**The Incurrable:** Most ferret owners will never meet a truly hopeless case. You may think you have that rare ferret, but chances are your biter falls into a category already described above.

No one likes to talk about habitual biters. Such a diagnosis cannot be made haphazardly or by the inexperienced. The truly incurrable ferret bites despite all sincere efforts on the human's part. And this cannot be judged quickly. It may take months or years of consistent, patient and firm rehabilitation to turn around a biting ferret. But, even incurrable ferrets deserve a loving and experienced home.

This list of reasons may cause people to think that an awful lot of humans are being bitten out there. But this isn't the case. I want to emphasize again that the aggressive, biting ferret is the unusual ferret. But people need to know that biting can be a possible problem. The more educated people are about biting, the fewer biting ferrets there will be.

#### Combat Biting

Learn more tips to help tame a biting ferret. [Click Here>>](#)

#### Chomp Control

What should you do if you find yourself with a ferret painfully attached to you? Don't jerk away from the ferret. You will only suffer worse pain. Keep your wits about you and get assistance from another person, if necessary. Sometimes it takes another pair of hands to pry one tooth off at a time. Gently insert a pen between the top and bottom jaw of the ferret as you are freed to prevent getting bitten again. Use great care when doing this to prevent causing any damage to the ferret's mouth and teeth.

Also, divert the ferret's attention by dripping olive oil or something similarly tasty on its nose. A ferret can't lick and bite at the same time. This reward-type method should be reserved for extreme cases. A spritz of cold water from the faucet often works, as does a dab of bitter bite deterrent at the corner of the ferret's mouth.

Remember in the midst of all the panic that you don't want to injure your ferret in any way. Doing so will set back your progress and only cause you regret later.

#### Living Bite-Free

Ferrets are complex animals, so understanding them may take some doing on your part. Turning a biter around takes knowledge, patience and consistency. No method of discipline works immediately. It takes time and repetition to get results. If nothing changes or the behavior becomes worse, try something new. Above all, remain calm and collected when disciplining a biter. Through trial and error, and sincere dedication on a caretaker's part, I'm confident that almost all aggressive ferrets can be successfully reintegrated into the family. Most people can work out behavior problems with their ferrets instead of dumping them at the nearest shelter or selling them to the highest bidder. However, if you find yourself unable to properly and safely deal with a biting ferret, seek out experienced help. Track down the nearest ferret shelter to get advice and guidance. Remember, most dog and cat shelters immediately euthanize aggressive ferrets.

