

Do Ferrets Feel Their Owner's Guilt?

How do ferrets react when a change in schedule puts limits on the time an owner can spend with them?

By Ailigh Vanderbush

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So far, none of Ailigh Vanderbush's ferrets have rebelled since a change in her schedule limited her time with them.

Do my ferrets feel my guilt? I asked myself this in August 2008, when I completely changed jobs and lifestyle. I was a teacher for a number of years, which allowed me to be home at 3:30 p.m. and have days off here and there, not to mention weeks off in the summer. This meant I had lots of time to spend with the ferrets. I worked part-time for the 2007-2008 school year, so I was home by 11 a.m. and had even more time to spend with the ferrets. I was really in-tune with their daily routine and their habits, and was quick to notice any potential health issues or behavioral issues.

Ferret Reactions To My Schedule Change

In August, our animal education nonprofit organization, Animalia, took a new and exciting direction as we opened a dog daycare and training center. As Animalia grew, I spent more of my time working with the animals; I am certified in animal behavior and training. Opening the daycare and training center was a dream come true, but since its opening I have been working like a crazy woman.

The daycare opens at 6:45 a.m. five days per week. The daycare closes at 6:45 p.m., but two to three times per week I conduct training classes that last until 8 p.m. It feels like I am never home anymore. Weekends are spent catching up on all the things I didn't do during the week, such as training my own puppy and cleaning the rest of our 60 animals.

At first, I totally focused on making the daycare and training center succeed. As time went on, I noticed that ferret nails were longer than we like, but finding time to trim them was a struggle. That's when I really began to wonder how my new life was affecting my ferrets.

My husband and I currently have a large number and a great variety of animals, but I started with an iguana and six ferrets. I have always been passionately attached to my animals, especially my ferrets. So, I began trying to visit with the ferrets once I got home from work and first thing in the morning. I also tried to make sure I was the one cleaning their room on the weekends, so that I could spend some "quality" time with them. But even finding the time for this in my schedule was a challenge.

The good news is that after six months, the ferrets don't seem too affected by my frequent absence. They seem as happy as ever to see me and to play with me, even if it isn't as often. They don't seem to mind the longer than normal nails or slightly dirtier than normal litter boxes. It might help that we have 13 ferrets, so they get plenty of ferret-ferret interaction. It also might help that my husband is great, and we have some fantastic volunteers. I like to think that I have raised well-adjusted, behaviorally sound, independent ferrets and that is why my absence seems to be affecting me more than them. Perhaps, however, six months is too early to judge; perhaps the ferrets may start to rebel later.

Other Ferrets And Ferret Owners

I asked other ferret owners about their experiences. After all, almost everyone has life changes due to a job or life events. Renee Downs recently relocated to Alaska. She went from being a full-time ferret-caregiver to working an 8-to-5 job. She said that her ferrets have adapted pretty well to her mobile lifestyle and enjoy time in their travel cage and the opportunity to explore new places. Now that she has settled down in Alaska, they are adjusting. The ferrets seemed to squabble a bit more at first, but they are getting into her routine as her schedule becomes more predictable.

Downs believes it is more important to spend quality time with ferrets rather than a high quantity, and she makes a special effort to interact with each ferret group each morning for 30 minutes. With routine comes predictability, so now the ferrets can look forward to interaction at specific times. This means they are ready and willing to play in the morning or evening on the new schedule. The ferrets also have adapted to being out of the cages for longer periods if Downs is short on time, instead of having one-on-one playtime. The key, according to Downs, is the ability to be flexible.

Lorie McKenna recently returned to work after 10 weeks off due to a broken ankle. McKenna said that she enjoyed being a full-time ferret-caregiver while convalescing at home. The ability to be at home all of the time gave her quality time to

spend with ill ferrets, which seemed to enjoy cuddling on their own schedule. She also noticed small changes in behavior and knew when something was wrong. She has been back at work now for two weeks and her ferrets seem to be adjusting well, although her sons note that they seem more hyper. They are also more in-tune with the new schedule and are waiting at the cage door for playtime when McKenna gets home.

The Inner Strength Of Ferrets

It seems that ferrets are pretty flexible and content to interact with us at any opportunity. They adapt well to new situations and new schedules. Predictability and a little consistency can help the transition. Hopefully, before my ferrets rebel and take over the whole house, I will be able to hire some help at the daycare, allowing me some free time for the ferrets, dog, cats, genets, kinkajous, reptiles, crow, tortoise, rats, degus, chinchillas, skunk, hedgehog, my husband and, oh yeah, me too.

Ailigh Vanderbush, CABT, is an animal behavior consultant who helps people with behavior and training for a variety of species, although ferrets are her specialty and favorite. As director of Animalia, a nonprofit organization, she promotes positive training and behavior modification methods through education and responsible pet ownership.