

Healthy Ferret Play

Playtime isn't just for fun — it stimulates your ferret's mind and can keep it healthy.

By Randy Melanie Belair

Posted: April 2, 2008, 5 a.m. EDT

To play or not to play? To a healthy ferret, this question has only one answer — “Yes, please!” Throughout their lives, healthy ferrets constantly engage in play with their owners, each other, various household pets or all on their own. Playing takes up a large part of the ferret's daily life. What else is there to do?

Nothing is more entertaining than watching ferrets play. Many years ago when I had six ferrets of my own, my friends visited just to watch the funny antics of the “moving carpet” of ferrets running and causing havoc in my home. They called it “Randy's Ferret Circus.” Most ferrets love human interaction and go out of their way to include you in their games and play. As long as you make time for them, you will be their favorite play toy.

Ferrets need a minimum of three to four hours a day engaging in play, socialization and investigation to help prevent stress. Boredom is a big problem with ferrets, so invent new games often. A bored ferret can become a stressed ferret — remember, variety is the spice of life! Bruce Williams, DVM, DACVP, of The Armed Forces Institute of Telepathology, feels strongly that play decreases stress. “Play is important because it is an outlet that decreases stress. Increased stress results in a number of adverse reactions, including immunosuppression and the creation of gastric ulcers, among other things.”

Avoid Prolonged Caging

If you keep your ferret caged too long, you'll be in for a big surprise when you finally let it out. Prolonged caging allows your pet time to think, and the activities that occur once it's finally free will amaze you. Those I've encountered include: pooping in a spot where you're most likely to step in it, deducing how to get onto the kitchen table, choosing which of your favorite plants to dig up, hiding your car keys so you can't find them, terrorizing the cat and sleeping in the most remote spot so you can't find your ferret when you are in a rush to get to work. Caging a ferret too long over time can also cause it to display obsessive-compulsive disorders, such as pacing back and forth in its cage, chewing and ingesting bedding, and other similar actions.

Aggression vs. Play

Our shelter has received many hysterical phone calls from new ferret parents thinking their ferret is attacking them. However, it's normal for a ferret to frantically dance around you, jump at you and swing from side to side, sometimes nipping at your toes or jumping at your legs. This activity is usually accompanied by a muttering sound similar to “dook, dook, wakka, wakka.” Most ferret owners call this energetic display The Weasel War Dance. It's your ferret's way of enticing you into a game of mock combat.

Your ferret wants you to pretend to chase and wrestle with him or her — generally one of a ferret's most desired games to play with you. Ferrets usually play well with other ferrets, although bickering occurs. According to Dr. Karen Regan, DVM, of the Animal Hospital of High Park in Toronto, “Noisy interaction (between ferrets) almost always indicates that some aggressive action is being taken.” She also admits that some form of vocalization is normal, but any high-pitched screams should not be tolerated. Regan goes on to say, “It is common to squabble over a special toy or territory in the room.

Of course, happy chucking noises are just comfort noises to entice play. This noise is often accompanied by War Dances conducted only by the happiest ferrets as they bounce around repeatedly. Some ferret combinations just simply do not get along, and you will see less of this type of obvious fun-seeking play and more of the nape biting and high-pitched squealing. It sounds awful when this occurs, but usually very little damage is done.”

These feisty little creatures, or “fur kids” as they are often endearingly called, are used to playing rough with their cage mates. While in play mode, most ferrets lightly nip at their caretaker's hands, arms or feet. This is normal behavior and mimics how ferrets play with each other. Your ferret sees you as its equal — a super huge fur kid — and will play with you the same way it would play with another ferret. Because your ferret will treat you like another ferret, teach it that your skin is not as tough as a ferret's. You need to be played with more gently. Teach your ferret to be gentle by using love and lots of positive reinforcement. Ferrets are easily trainable at any age as long as you are willing to be patient and affectionate.

Sociability

Ferrets are highly social animals. They will, with time and careful introduction, play with cats, dogs and other ferrets. I have even known one ferret that adopted a mouse as her “pet.” This is highly unusual behavior for a ferret. Most ferrets would kill the mouse. Ferrets’ curious natures make them nearly fearless, so use caution when introducing them to a new pet. Your ferret needs to feel comfortable in its environment before any introductions can be made. If your ferret is fearful, it may “hiss” and shy away. Hissing sounds like your ferret is sucking in a big breath of air. This action signals that your ferret is not ready to interact yet.

In a new environment, a ferret must probe every corner before engaging in play. Their nature forbids play before feeling confident that they have sniffed every new smell, looked in every corner, pooped by the door and had at least one treat. It is nearly impossible to get an investigating ferret interested in playing with you until he or she has checked out everything. Once this is accomplished, a ferret will happily play and war dance — showing you how agile and carefree it can be.

Stolen Goodies

Ferrets are awesome thieves. They incorporate their thievery into all aspects of their play. Many steal their toys, hiding them away for a later playtime. Some ferrets hide their toys from their owners as a sort of hide-and-seek game, daring you to find their hiding spots. Others aren’t happy with just stealing toys. They feel the need to have anything that isn’t theirs and are tenacious enough to figure out how to get to almost anything. Some ferrets like to steal socks while others enjoy purloining money, jewelry, television converters, shoes, makeup and wallets. An open purse or duffel bag on the floor is fair game to a ferret.

If it’s not tied or bolted down, then a ferret believes that any item rightfully belongs to it and will do just about anything to get it. Some ferrets relish the challenge of opening zipped, locked or sealed bags and purses. They’re like a puzzle game for them. Because ferrets are intelligent and tenacious, they also possess incredible problem-solving skills. Sometimes, you can actually see a ferret thinking and calculating the distance between the floor and the dining room table. It could be scheming how to reach the shiny object you took away from them and placed there.

Ferrets can get really angry and act spoiled when you take something from them that they worked really hard to steal. They may look away from you grumbling under their breath, uttering low pitched, monotone dooking noises. You’ll notice the difference in sound right away from their usual happy, higher-pitched dooking.

Safety

Intelligence and curiosity often get ferrets into trouble during playtime. Forget the saying, “Curiosity Killed The Cat.” Ferrets are far more curious than cats, and for this reason, extra precautions must be taken to ensure safe surroundings for your ferret. Given half a chance, they will explore any hidey-hole, opening or new area without hesitation. They just follow their noses and never look back. We once had a ferret dig and crawl his way out of a tiny hole in a window screen only to make his way to the roof of his foster Mom’s home!

Thankfully, he was retrieved without harm, but this demonstrated to us the true nature, curiosity and fearlessness this ferret had. If a ferret can climb it, it will. If a ferret can steal it, it will. If a ferret thinks it can get away with it, trust me, it will. I’ve found ferrets in the oddest places during playtime. I once found one in the refrigerator eating leftover chicken, and one in the Christmas tree trying to steal my ornaments!

Toy Time

Ferrets love to tunnel, steal and dig — and it’s easy to appease these desires. Dryer hose from a local hardware store can provide hours of tunneling fun for your ferret. Another favorite pastime is digging up household plants. To avoid this calamity, introduce a box filled with dirt for your ferret to dig and tunnel in. They love to get dirty and look ridiculous in the process. You can also get a shallow pan and fill it with water and your ferret’s toys. You’ll laugh a lot watching your pet trying to reach its toys without getting wet, and then hide them away.

Ferrets’ tunneling, pack ratting and digging behavior is instinctive. According to an article written by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, our housepets have a need to dig and tunnel, much like the ferret’s wild cousin, the black-footed ferret. The article goes on to say that the black-footed ferret plays much like the ferrets we have in our homes. The only difference is that our ferret’s wild cousin remains on a normal play schedule even during illness to hide its vulnerability. Thankfully, our fur kids are quite different.

A ferret parent will almost always know when something is seriously wrong with a ferret. The first sign of illness is usually a ferret’s lack of interest in play. “Any change in normal behavior or play rituals warrant a trip to your veterinarian” said Regan. “Only you know your pet, and only you can tell the beginning signs of illness if you learn your ferret’s normal

behavior routine."When a ferret is sick, often the first signs are lack of interest in play or a change in normal play routines. If in pain, sometimes even the most docile ferret could be capable of biting. Sick ferrets will commonly withdraw from the rest of the playgroup and become quiet and disinterested in their normal games.

Salem was one of my ferrets who was a troublemaker throughout his life. Over time, he began to quiet down and withdraw from the other ferrets in the house. I thought he was just maturing at 5 years old. Then I remembered that ferrets are never supposed to quiet down, even if they are older. Off we went to the vet. Sure enough, Salem had a benign tumor in his chest that was pushing on his windpipe and making it hard for him to breathe. After the tumor was removed, Salem went back to being his normal troublesome self for two more years, until lymphoma eventually took him from me.

I cannot stress how important it is for you to know your ferret. Any change in behavior warrants a trip to a ferret-knowledgeable veterinarian. Don't be afraid to tell your veterinarian that your ferret, "Just isn't acting right," even if you can't put your finger on what exactly is wrong. Most veterinarians take this comment quite seriously and will be able to advise you on testing procedures that are necessary to determine the problem.

Special-Needs Ferrets

Frightened, sick or abused ferrets will not have a normal play routine. Shelters across the globe see these types of ferrets all the time. Susan, from South Wales in the United Kingdom, has seen the typical confusion behavior from many rescued ferrets. "When Eric joined us recently, it took him weeks to learn how to play. The others would run up, tag him and run off and he would just stand there looking so confused. Now he has learnt to play and dooks and 'sprongs' with the best! You just need to give them a little time and extra love to see them blossom."

Susie, mother at a foster home for ferrets in Texas, knows just what it takes to get an abused ferret to blossom. "It is important that you bond with abused or neglected ferrets first before expecting them to play. I stay right there with them while they do their own exploring until they are comfortable enough to start hiding things in their own hidey-holes outside the cage." Abused or neglected ferrets are easy to spot. Most will not understand exactly how to play and will wander around an open room looking to you for guidance.

We once had a ferret at our shelter named Oso. Before he came to us, he was never let out of his cage. When he was, he was tormented by young children that were never taught to play gentle with him. We got him when he was 6, and he had advanced adrenal disease. I'll never forget the feeling I had of seeing him play for the first time, after many months of nurturing him and kissing all his troubles away. Nothing in the world feels better than seeing an abused ferret doing a War Dance for the very first time. It still brings tears to my eyes thinking about him.

Thief of Hearts

Remember to relax and enjoy the company of your ferret. Ferrets bring much love, happiness and entertainment into our lives. Unfortunately, they don't live nearly long enough, so take pleasure in every moment of your time with them. They aren't just marvelous thieves — they are the true thieves of the heart. They stole my heart a long time ago, as I'm sure they will steal yours.

Randy Melanie Belair founded The Ferret Aid Society (www.ferretaid.org) in Toronto in 1996 and continued her educational efforts by founding the 1st International Ferret Symposium.