

Ferrets Who Bite

By Michele Paulhus

Ferrets are highly intelligent, curious and engaging little creatures. They also have extremely thick skin—literally. Domestic ferrets bite for a variety of reasons: play, attention seeking, communication, fear (either from abusive handling or trauma) and less often, true aggression.

The single most important and difficult part of dealing with a biter, whether it be an average “bitey” ferret, or fear aggression borne of abusive handling is figuring out exactly why they are biting. The best way to figure that out is to pay special attention to the context in which he/she is biting. I’ve had two nose biters; one bit because he was telling me he wanted to be put down, the other because she was fearful and I suspect that her prior owners held her up to their face and yelled at her. Even though they both bit noses, I handled them completely differently because the reason they were biting was different. It is important to assess the personality of the ferret, along with other body language clues.

The most common “bitey” ferret is in no way intending to hurt you or be aggressive. He either does not realize that he is biting too hard and hurting you or he is playful and wants to include you in his play. He doesn’t understand that our skin is much thinner than his and we are not nearly as tough. There are various ways to handle this and you may need to try a number of them before you find one that works best on your particular ferret.

If the ferret is using what we refer to in my house as *very rude teeth*, then I recommend stopping play with bare hands until he can become more polite. You can use any toy that makes you both happy as long as he can not access your (Continued next page)

Cool Cribs

This is where, Jethro, Ziva, Abby, and Thumper live at Bill & Jackie’s. It’s a three level custom made cage.

- The lower door is at floor level for easy ferret access.
- A variety of beds on middle and upper levels
- Litter box on each level
- Food on lower level only
- Middle and upper floors entirely cloth covered



Also noteworthy is this gate keeping ferrets in their half of the house. Custom built by a cabinet maker, it can fold out of sight or extend to clip to the opposite wall. 🐾



Upcoming Events

MaFF General Meeting: Elections and Ferret Freedom Day Celebration
Sun, Mar 18 12:00pm-4:00pm
Mark & Jody’s in Cambridge.

Ferret Education/Adoption Days
Look for MaFF at various area pet stores. See the complete schedule on our web site: maferrets.org. 🐾

Overheard at the Kibble Bowl

“Chloe, get out of the trash, we don’t throw away weasels, we recycle them.”

“Look, someone threw away a perfectly good ferret.” (after finding a beloved ferret had climbed in the trash bin)

“Wake up and get out of the litter box, you are a boy, not a poo poo.”

“I didn’t know I could find these at Target.” (after finding a ferret curled up in a Target shopping bag)

“Good thing she can’t read” (when finding a ferret in a bag that clearly states that the bag is not a toy)

“No, bring those back, they are my socks.”

“You have 8 rooms, they have one—if you leave your shoes in their room, I have no sympathy when your insoles disappear.”

“For God’s sake, just give her the sock!” (when a 6’2” man was fighting with a 6 inch hissing ferret over his sock)

“Did you call him Squishy before or after you stepped on him?” (after tripping over a ferret nicknamed Squishy)

“Yeah, Tuesday is always wet. Drinking water is a full body sport for her.”

“It’s bad enough when you flip your own, but flipping other people’s soup bowls is just rude.”

“That’s a good looking poop.”

And most common:

“It’s a really good thing you’re so cute.” 🐾

Our foster ferrets count on your membership dues.

Become a MaFF Member Today!

Sign up on our website at www.maferrets.org/join

(Continued from previous page)
bare hand—a blanket, a towel, rolled up sock, cat toys, etc. It can be absolutely anything as long as you both enjoy it.

One of the easiest things to try is when he is playing with polite teeth, continue to play. When his teeth become rude, either stop moving your hand, or remove your hand entirely for a couple of seconds. Turn your back on him and tuck your hands under your arms if you need to. Then return to play. When the rude teeth return, do the same thing all over again.

You must be consistent—lack of consistency is confusing and is worse than doing nothing. *The bottom line is that he will get what he wants (to play with you) as soon as he gives you what you want (no biting).*

The “attention seeker” is exactly what it sounds like. She is just trying to get your attention. This type of biting is so common because it works; it is difficult to not pay attention to a ferret who is biting you. You want to *ignore* negative behavior and *reward* positive behavior. So, with this ferret you want to ignore her when she is biting and give her the attention she craves *as soon* as she stops. With this girl, I just brush her off when she is trying to bite me. Don't use words or make a big deal. **Don't make it fun.** Just be very matter of fact without paying her excessive attention. When she stops, make a big deal about what a good girl she is; give her her favorite treat and pay her lots of attention. If you can, try to give her the positive attention *before* she asks for it with rude teeth. The point is: only reward her with the attention she wants when she is *not* biting. I'm not saying to let the ferret bite you. Protect yourself as best as possible by wearing shoes or long sleeves.

Ferrets use their teeth to communicate because it has proven to be the quickest most effective way for them to express themselves. So, it is our job to teach them to communicate more appropriately. I've found the best way to teach them to “speak nicely” is very

similar to the way I work with the attention seeker. A good example of this is one of my nose biters. He used to bite my nose when he was done getting hugs and kisses and wanted me to put him down. I did not put him down when he wiggled and tried to bite. As soon as he calmed down I immediately put him down and told him he was a good boy. I also put Ferretone™ on my nose and when he licked it, I immediately put him down. It did not take him long to learn that when he wanted me to put him down, all he had to do was give my nose one kiss. That was five years ago and to this day, he gives me a kiss on the nose when he wants me to put him down.



Michele's Latte showing her teeth.

I handle the fear biter different from any other kind of biter and this type of biter is the perfect example of why it is so important to figure out the reason for the behavior prior to attempting to resolve it. Oddly enough, with fear biters, I don't address the biting at all. They are afraid. They have been taught that humans are not to be trusted and they've learned that a hard chomp is usually effective in getting the “scary thing” away from them. This ferret just needs to be taught that he can trust you. A good way to start with this guy is to find a treat that he really likes (Ferretone™ typically works perfectly for this) dribble it along the back of your hand and just let the ferret lick it up. Don't pat him, don't touch him—the purpose of this is so he can start equating hands with good things. If you are able to pick him up, hold him, cuddle him and talk to him while he

is licking the Ferretone™ off your hand. The more often you are able to do this, the better off you both will be. Even more importantly, every time he bites me I hug and kiss him. (Make sure that you are holding him in such a way that he is unable to bite you.) He needs to know that he is safe and no matter what he does I will not hurt him. Amusingly, once this ferret learns to trust and stop biting, he is usually the one who becomes a total mama's or daddy's boy.

There is another group of “average” biters—and he is the one who just thinks its funny to nibble on you. He is not vicious or bad tempered and he typically has a personality that constantly cracks you up. Sorry, we haven't been able to rehab this guy yet—he is having too much fun. The good thing is, even though you get a nibble now and then, enjoy him, he's a good boy and hilarious!

I must stress that if you have a ferret that starts biting out of the blue when he never has before, take him to the vet. It might be a sign that he is not feeling well.

Working with a biting ferret can be time consuming, frustrating and ultimately well worth it. The ferrets that I have bonded to the closest have been the ones that I've had to work with the hardest. Let me tell you a secret: twenty people could probably tell you twenty different strategies and they could all be correct. The true secret is providing unconditional love, tolerance, safety, consistency and patience.

Although viscous and true aggression biters are less common, they are out there and very difficult to deal with. It's OK to ask for help. If you have issues/questions about biting ferrets, email: biteyferrets@maferrets.org.*

The Fuzzy Papers

Contributors: Michele Paulhus,
Jody Renouf & Mark Rosenstein.
Send submissions to
publications@maferrets.org.

 Find us on
Facebook
facebook.com/maferrets