HOW DO I STOP MY FERRET FROM BITING?

(re-printed from the SA Ferret Association's "Guide to ferret Keeping" by Geoff Smith)

We firstly have to answer the important question, *"Why is the ferret trying to bite?"* Is it young or old? Is it only just starting to try, or has it always been nippy? Does it only try to bite you, or does it try to nip everybody? Does it bite hard and hold on, or does it just nip?

If the ferret is just playing games (as young ones, in particular, will always do) biting is a habit that he or she will grow out of fairly quickly. When ferrets are simply playing games, their nips are usually of little consequence and rarely break the skin. Sometimes though, boisterous youngsters don't know their own strength and inflict painful bites unintentionally. Their own skin is quite tough, and their pain threshold appears to be quite high, so what they regard as harmless fun, you may find a painful and frightening experience.

This type of ferret needs a firm but kindly hand. They need to be shown that you are the boss, and that you will not tolerate their hurting you. To do this, you must show them the meaning of the word ***"No!"*** Under no circumstances should you smack them or "nose flick" them. Ferrets are only small and have sensitive noses which can be easily injured. Further, they are often very stubborn, and smacking them simply makes them more ferocious.

Until they have become familiarised with their owners and learned some manners, they shouldn't be allowed too close to areas of the body where the skin is soft, such as the face, neck or armpits. This is especially important with little children, who should never be left unsupervised with ferrets. Ferrets that are simply "full of beans", are not the main culprits when it comes to troublesome biting.

Real "hard biters", i.e. those that bite at any opportunity, inflicting serious pain and refusing to let go, are what have given ferrets a bad image in the past. To understand why some ferrets develop the hard biting habit, we need to try to view the world from a ferret's viewpoint. Try to imagine what it must be like to stand only about six inches tall, to have poor eyesight, very good hearing and extremely acute senses of both smell and touch. Ferrets see things only about one eighth as well as humans (i.e. things need to be eight times closer before they can be seen properly). Loud or sudden noises, new smells and sudden brushes of things against the whiskers may all evoke an apparently unexplainable, savage response.

Sometimes, new ferret owners, in despair, simply give up. They assume it must be a "faulty ferret" then seek a new home for it, perhaps as a hunter where savagery is viewed (completely wrongly) as desirable. (Hunting ferrets, in fact, need to be just as tame and trustworthy as any other pet ferrets, since they work better and will return quickly when called if they like being handled by their owners).

Savage ferrets usually try to bite everybody, and they may be any age at all. Their main reason for biting results from terror of both humans and being handled. Often they have been abused, or at least severely neglected by people.

Ferrets which have had little handling often fall into the worst category here. There are several reasons why.

Imagine what it must be like from the ferret's perspective when this towering great creature suddenly and unexpectedly clamps its cold, peculiar smelling sweaty hands around it and sweeps it up to a massive height above the ground. On a human scale, it would be like being snatched up suddenly to a height of thirty or forty feet. This would certainly scare most of us, even if it was expected! (Ferrets hardly sweat at all and have a higher body temperature than humans, so we normally feel somewhere between cool and cold to them). To further terrify it, one only has to drop the animal once or twice and from then on, it will invariably try to bite anybody that attempts to pick it up.

Being picked up also deprives the ferret of its liberty. Ferrets are single minded and often very strong willed. If they detect the slightest weakness in their owner, they will exploit it. The natural reaction to being restrained is to struggle, claw and perhaps try to bite.

To make matters worse, once they have caused fright or anxiety in their handler, the handler's hands emit all sorts of strange smells and fear messages. This is especially the case once they have sunk their teeth in. To the ferret's delicate senses, this justifies and perhaps even rewards their struggle. At the same time that the owner is subconsciously learning to be scared of the ferret's biting behaviour, the ferret is training the owner to leave it alone. The ferret is now teaching you to leave it alone, **or else!**

Thinking like a ferret is not easy for humans, but it is clear that ferrets do have an innate fear of both falling and also of being snatched up into the air.

It is probable that ferrets are instinctively scared of predatory birds such as hawks and owls, which swoop from above and may kill by dropping their prey from a height. Thus, to avoid frightening the ferret it is essential to handle them calmly, gently and confidently. Even then, ferrets often communicate with their cage-mates by biting behaviour which can be frightening to humans even if it doesn't cause much damage.

Retraining a ferret which has learned to bite is possible but not always easy. Back in the old days when most ferrets were kept for rabbit hunting, people didn't handle them much because they were frightened of being bitten. The rule was *"don't pick him up, he'll bite you!"*. We now know that the exact opposite of this is true, namely if you don't touch him he will indeed bite you. Ferrets which are only handled infrequently <u>are</u> fearful of being picked up, so the rule, instead, should be: *"pick him up or he'll bite you!"*

The first thing the new owner must do is to become confident in properly picking up and handling ferrets. This can be done with a tame ferret, by placing the right hand over the shoulders and the left hand under the body to support it as you pick it up.

They should never be snatched up as this will frighten them and make them seek to avoid being picked up alto-

gether. When holding a ferret in the proper way, as explained, it is easy to control its movements, and without doing any harm, control the pressure of the grip so that even a truly savage animal can be prevented from swivelling around and biting the hand holding it.

Eventually a ferret can become quite comfortable about being picked up in one hand, but this may scare them to start off with. One should proceed slowly until both ferret and owner are confident that no harm is going to ensue, and a friendly bond of familiarity is established.

With the seriously recalcitrant biters (such as some particularly badly neglected ferrets that are rescued by SAFA from time to time) it becomes necessary to take serious measures to teach the animal some manners.

The first thing to do with a savage animal is to hold it in a restraining grip around the shoulders with the right hand, and offer it the knuckles of the left hand, which is clenched tightly into a fist. This presents it with the trainer's smell but a shape that is hard to bite. If the ferret immediately snaps at the knuckles of the "bait hand", the fist should be withdrawn and the word "NO!" uttered sharply at the ferret.

Many years of trial and error have shown that the most effective methods of teaching ferrets manners are those which gently reassure the animal, rewarding good behaviour and always promptly responding to bad behaviour with the word "NO!" and maybe some simple, non-violent punishment, such as a special, non-stimulating environment.

A "punishment environment", or "*sin-bin*" can be easily made from a large, empty cardboard box. This may need a water bowl in hot weather, but nothing else.

The top is left open, and the ferret is simply placed into this boring environment for say fifteen minutes, every time he tries to bite. There is nothing wrong with having a sturdy leather glove to protect your holding hand in the early stages of training, if this gives the trainer confidence.

The owner should give each ferret a name and then use it every time the animal is picked up and handled. It is very important to talk to the ferret as often as possible. It should come to associate its name with being called. The training process consists of picking the animal up and putting it down again, talking gently to it all the time. If it becomes aggressive, say "NO!" and put it into the sin bin for a short while.

Training a ferret is easiest when it is hungry. It should be picked up and fed small treats of appetising food (such as small cubes of raw meat) while you are holding it and talking to it. *"Nutrical"* is a proprietary diet supplement, available in tubes from the vet, that can be used very effectively to bribe ferrets and teach them to do as bidden.

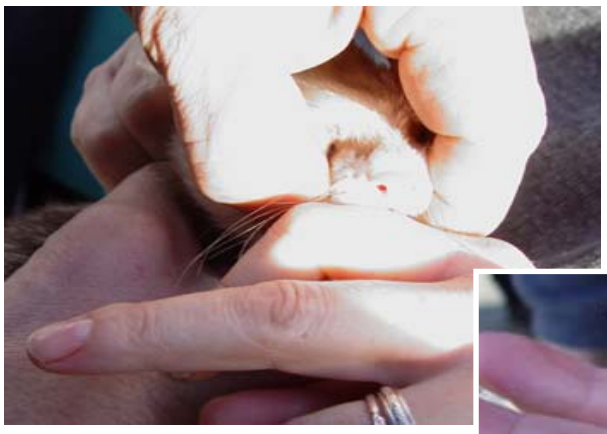
If the animal is hungry and the only way it can get the food it craves is to eat while it is being held, it quickly learns to ignore being held. Don't try to be too quick with the food, and talk gently to it at all times.

In this way, you are rewarding the ferret for not trying to bite you while you are holding it, so it quickly comes to associate being held with pleasure.

Similarly, ferrets love to smell and experience new things. The bad biter can be picked up, and provided it behaves properly, can be taken on a "sensory excursion", say for a walk around the garden.

While you hold it, let it smell the leaves and explore the sounds and smells outdoors. If it tries to bite, say "NO!" and put it back into the sin-bin for a while, so that it can associate "NO!" and biting with boredom.

In this way, your ferret will come to associate being handled and picked up with pleasure rather than fear or pain. The whole training exercise is a two way process in which ferret and owner mutually develop a sense of trust and friendship. The owner teaches the ferret not to bite, and in doing so develops the confidence to avoid being bitten.



The ferret at left has bitten the left hand (shown below after separating the ferret) *very* hard. Something scared the ferret, and the person who was bitten was not the ferret's usual handler. Bites that draw blood should be treated seriously .... ***(continued below)***

Persons handling ferrets should expect the occasional nip, but not ones that break the skin.

Ferret handlers should **always** keep their tetanus vaccinations up to date.