

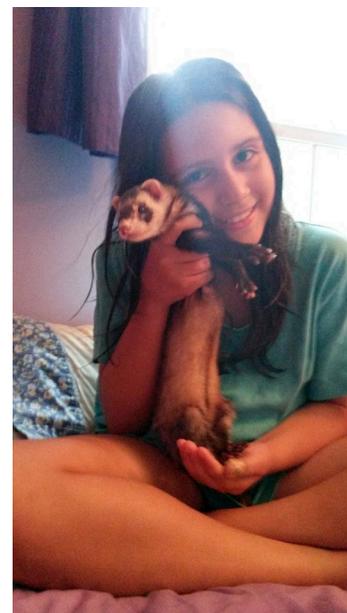
Sharing Your Home with Both Children and Ferrets

“Hey Mister, what happened to your dog?” asked the child in *Kindergarten Cop*. The reply was, “It’s not a dog, it’s a ferret!” While humorous, this movie scene provides a typical example of misunderstandings surrounding pet ferrets, the most prevalent being that ferrets will bite. Taking it a step further, the media stereotypically depicts ferrets as biters of babies and children. The fact is, children and ferrets can be wonderful playmates. Of course supervision is always the number one rule when introducing ferrets to children, but with proper supervision they can become the best of friends.

Proper Handling

Proper handling is the first thing to address when introducing ferrets and children. A child should be taught how to hold and care for a ferret through plenty of modeling by adults in the household and should then practice these techniques numerous times so as to understand how it should be appropriately done. Children often think of ferrets as small cats and will encourage the ferret to jump from their hands to the floor or will just drop the ferret thinking that it will land correctly like cats do but ferrets are not meant to be handled like cats and learning how to properly manage a ferret is the key to safe interactions between children and ferrets. Many children will run right up to a ferret and try to touch its face or will stick their fingers out to let the ferret smell them, similar to what many people do when they meet new cats or dogs. With ferrets, especially young ferrets, this often will startle them and can cause them to bite. When introducing ferrets to children, be sure to hold the ferret facing away from the child. In this way, the child can start by petting the ferret’s back and does not have to worry about being nipped if the ferret is startled.

When allowing a child to handle the ferret for the first time, a handling technique that is safe for both the ferret and child is important. One excellent example of this is called the “calm down hold.” This hold is demonstrated in the picture below. Lindsey Tootle describes how the hold is performed, “Hold your ferret in your left hand. It is important to notice that the ferret’s chin rests over your hand with none of your fingers close enough to be bitten. The ferret’s right front leg is between your pointer finger and middle finger. The left leg cannot move around either so the ferret cannot change its position to issue a bite. Hold your ferret’s body against your chest and not too close to your chin! Take your right hand and gently stroke the ferret from the ferret’s chest downward in loving strokes. This teaches calmness, trust and that your arms and hands are a place of calmness, a place of warmth and protection.”



Nikki Galdamez with Zeplin
(Mollie Nicholson)

Introducing a Ferret to the Children in Your Household

Choosing to bring a ferret into your household is a decision that should not be made lightly. If you already have children in your home, taking them into consideration before getting any new pet is essential. How will your child react to a ferret? Will they be able to play gently with the ferret? Can you provide a safe child-free area for your ferret? Can you ensure that your children's toys won't be hazardous to your ferret? These are just a few of the many questions that should be addressed before bringing home your new addition.



*Katy Tootle with Sophia
(Lindsey Tootle)*

Once the decision has been made to bring home a new ferret, you may be faced with concerns from family and friends. Many people feel that ferrets and children should not be mixed and you may hear comments such as “Ferrets are mean and can't be trusted around children” or “You just watch, your child will get bitten by that ferret.” Sadly, movies, TV shows and the media often portray this as being fact, while ferrets are far less likely to bite a child than dogs. Next, you need to decide from where you will be getting your newest family member. Many pet stores sell baby ferrets, but you can also purchase ferrets from reputable private ferret breeders as well as adopt from ferret shelters. Ferret shelters are a great way to allow your children to meet and interact with ferrets before you decide to bring one into your household and shelters often have ferrets that came from homes with children that can be easier to introduce into your household compared to a baby ferret. Do take into consideration that some ferret shelters will not adopt ferrets out to families with children under certain ages and that this varies from shelter to shelter.

Many fellow ferret owners have dealt with the same concerns over safety and bringing ferrets into their household. Fortunately, these are shared here to lend some insight into how ferrets were safely brought into their households and how the experience changed their families.

Kay Amrine, owner of Firestorm Ferrets, first introduced her son to ferrets when he was five years old. The initial introductions were taken slowly and cautiously. Kay said, “We let him watch the ferret and let the ferret settle in and get used to us and the sounds in our household. We only let our son interact with the ferret when we were in the room and could watch both of them. We explained to him that to the ferret he was a giant and we asked him how he would feel if a giant spoke in a loud voice to him or poked his fingers through his window to his room. He said, ‘I would be scared and tell him to stop.’ I said, ‘Well what if you couldn't talk’ and he said ‘I would hit him or throw stuff to make him go away.’ So I explained the only way the ferret could protect himself when scared would be to bite, since he couldn't yell or throw things. After that he learned to use a

softer tone and not bother the ferret when in his cage unless I was there so he wouldn't scare him."

When it came to ferret playtime at Kay's house, it was always supervised until she felt comfortable letting her son get the ferrets out on his own. Kay said, "I think this has to be based on each child. Some children are just naturally better with animals than others and the best way to find out is to watch how the child and ferret interact. Make sure they both seem comfortable with each other and that the child knows how to properly handle the ferret and what not to do. The ferrets were only allowed in one room of the house to protect them. That way I didn't have to worry about small toy pieces being left out and the ferrets possibly eating them or a cage door accidentally being opened. Also, if I heard the door to that room open I knew somebody was going in or out and could go supervise if needed." When it comes to introducing ferrets into your household Kay suggests, "Teach your children to respect ferrets and any other pet you have. The animals cannot tell us when they are scared or hurt so it is up to us to protect them and teach our children the proper way to treat them. Teaching children how to properly care for an animal teaches them how to become caring, loving adults as well."



*Jenny Galdamez with Lily Mollie
(Nicholsone)*

Robin Landes, a ferret owner from Virginia, first introduced ferrets to Sky, her significant other's daughter, when she was 10 years old. At the time Robin owned four ferrets that ranged in age from 8 months to 7 years. Sky took to them immediately. Robin said, "We simply modeled over and over the correct way to handle them. We made it very clear that bare feet are better than feet in socks or Pink [one of Robin's ferrets] would try to remove the socks! We talked a lot about watching your feet and where you walk so as not to accidentally step on them. We showed her how to feed and give treats. She immediately loved their playfulness, countered by cuddliness after a good romp. She especially enjoyed playing with them in the tube and with a toy dangling from a stick. Sky enjoys the ferrets so much, she has even written guest posts for a blog about ferrets."

When it comes to playtime at her house, Robin said, "We definitely have ferret-free zones. We have gates and leave some doors closed at all times, like Sky's bedroom. We have discussed at length choking hazards and items that could cause a blockage. She loves to take one of the ferrets in when she showers. He patiently waits for her, lounging on the bathmat. He hangs out with her when she reads or is on her netbook. We also have strategies for her to use if they play rough. We keep several larger toys on hand so that if one appears ready to grab or nibble, she can offer them the toy as an alternative to fingers and toes! She has been nipped (by kits in training) and at first,

though not really hurt, would cry at the insult. After a few years, she is adept at avoiding any nips or scratches and knows to control their little face and tell them 'no!' When adults are not around, the ferrets stay in their bedroom (they are not caged, but are confined to one room when we are away)."

Above we have heard from adults introducing children to ferrets, now we will hear a child's perspective on meeting ferrets for the first time. Skylar Weisenfluh, a 13 year old from Virginia, first was introduced to ferrets three years ago at Robin Landes' house. Skylar said, "I didn't know there was such thing as a ferret before I met one for the first time when I first met Karu. He was super excited and happy. I played with him for a long time, nonstop. He was full of energy! I personally think ferrets are amazing. You have to be super careful with how you pick them up and how not to twist their back. You don't want them getting hurt in any way. Some ferrets do nibble when they get wild and crazy. They aren't doing it to be mean, they are just trying to play. It has happened to me before. It only hurts a little at first. Some nibbles don't hurt at all. Ferrets and I have had many fun times together."



*Sky Weisenfluh with Karu, Fwin & Mac
(Robin Landes)*

When it comes to introducing ferrets and children, every person interviewed said that supervision is essential, especially for the first few weeks. It is also important to include children in the process of choosing a ferret, naming a ferret, and helping to take care of it. Allowing children to have a duty related to the ferrets helps them feel connected to the new addition, even if that just involves snuggling or playing with the ferret every day. Teaching children how to properly pick up and hold a ferret is important, especially since ferrets cannot be dropped to the ground as many people do with cats. Ferrets need to be gently placed on the ground. If the interaction is not going well at the start, be sure to take it slow, and over time the relationship between the child and ferret will grow. Children also must be told that ferrets are obligate carnivores and should not be fed "human food." Many children may want to share their candy with ferrets and they need to be taught that ferrets should only eat ferret appropriate food.

Bringing Home the Human Baby

So you have a new human baby in the household and you also happen to own ferrets, now what do you do? While in the past this wasn't a common occurrence, with ferrets becoming more popular household pets for younger adults, this scenario is one that is playing out more and more these days. Of course, you will have some people immediately telling you that the ferrets must go; they will maul, kill, or eat your baby. The media portrays this stereotype extensively and sadly many ferret owners have

given up their beloved pets because they have been told by many people that human babies and ferrets cannot be in the same household together. When you first bring home your new baby, your ferret may become confused. To him, there is a new creature in the house that makes a lot of noise and is getting a lot of attention. If your ferret had free roam throughout the entire house in the past, the baby's room and other rooms may now be off limits to him which can confuse him or cause him to become stressed. It is a good idea to get the ferret used to new routines prior to the baby's arrival to make it less stressful for your ferret.



Chaz Lakinger with Belle (Amanda Hunt-Loche)

During the first few months of life with the new baby, try to give your ferret extra attention, this helps make the transition much easier for everyone in the household. Taking your ferret into the baby's room and showing him the new baby once in a while is also very important, it allows the ferret to get used to the new baby and hopefully one day they will become great friends.

With a new baby, you will need to set up ferret-free zones in your house, the baby's room being one of them. Ferrets are very curious animals and will want to come investigate the baby and a baby that is crying or rolling around could scare the ferret and cause it to bite. Installing ferret-proof baby gates across room doors is a good way to allow your ferret to get adequate run time while still keeping your baby safe. And with ferrets being curious little creatures, you need to make sure that all the new baby supplies are kept out of reach, since there is nothing more a ferret would love to stash than a nice rubber or silicon pacifier, bottle or sippy cup, on which the ferrets may chew – possibly causing blockages or even death.

Once your baby gets older and can sit up on their own, this is a good time to start introducing your ferret to the baby. At this young age, babies don't understand how to properly hold a ferret or how to properly pet a ferret, so constant supervision is very important. Often times at this age, the baby just loves to look at the ferret and giggle and babble at it. This is also a good time to show the baby how to gently pet the ferret. You will need to take the baby's hand and rub it down the back of the ferret.

As your baby grows into toddlerhood and begins to crawl and then walk, you can allow more interaction between your toddler and ferret. Many ferrets love getting to interact with these fun, small humans and a great bond can begin to form. When you feel the time is right, you can start allowing more interactions between your toddler and ferret. A good way to introduce your toddler to your ferret is to have your ferret in a ferret playpen. This allows the ferret to play and have fun and your toddler can sit on the

outside of the playpen and watch the action. In watching the ferret war-dance and play with toys, this gives your toddler an idea of what these fun little creatures can do and how they act. Once the ferret and toddler get used to each other you can start letting them interact with each other under adult supervision. Blocking off a specific room in your house is a great way to allow your toddler and ferret to get to know each other. Make sure there are plenty of hiding spaces so your ferret can hide if it chooses. Make sure an adult is always in the room and next to the toddler to ensure that nobody gets hurt. The adult can show the toddler how to properly pet the ferret, and when the toddler gets old enough, they can be taught how to properly hold the ferret. With proper supervision a great bond can form between toddlers and ferrets.



Jeremy Pugh with Apollo (Jamie Houseman)

Maggie Houseman, a ferret owner from New York, often has her 2 ½ year old nieces and nephew visit her house and interact with her ferrets. These children were raised around pets and have three cats and a dog in their own house. Maggie said, “Even before the kids could sit up, they were taught how to be gentle with the pets. When we first introduced them to the ferrets, we had them sit on the floor, brought the calmer ferrets in, set them in their laps, and emphasized the 'gentle' again. The kids loved it! The ferrets were very curious and loved to sniff faces, ears, hair etc. As they got a little older, when they

came over, we would let them go look for ferrets, but they were not allowed to touch them until they ferret came out of his or her hiding spot. The kids would look in the little spaces between things, spot a nose, and call for Auntie and Uncle, and we would bring out the ferret to play, and eventually the other ferrets would come out. The kids love seeing new noses pop out as they come out! I think because the kids were raised from the start with proper respect for animals, we never had to worry about them reaching in and pulling one out. We do keep a very close eye on both kids and ferrets when they are together, but I have never had any issues. This is why I have no issues having my nieces and nephew here to play with them. In fact, we have been able to show the kids how to properly carry a ferret, and while we don't encourage it, they do follow instructions very well.”

Introducing your ferrets to your new baby may seem like a daunting task, but with proper supervision it can be a wonderful experience for both your ferrets and baby. Teaching your baby and toddler how to interact with ferrets is a process that does take time. Some days when a baby or toddler is fussy and throwing tantrums you will want to avoid interactions with the ferrets, you don't want to take the chance that your child could hurt your ferret or that your ferret might bite your child. Children that grow up

around animals learn how to love animals from an early age and often form lifelong bonds with their new animal friends.

Introducing Ferrets to Your Children's Friends

When you have children in your household, inevitably you will deal with the fact that your children will have friends visit at times. How do you deal with this situation? All parents react differently, but one thing they all agree on is that if the ferrets are allowed out to play, supervision is required at all times. When allowing other children or adults to interact with your ferrets, it is important to ensure that your ferret is current on vaccines, especially rabies vaccines. If your ferret does happen to bite a child or adult and is not vaccinated, your ferret may be required to be euthanized to test for rabies, so it is very important that vaccines are current.

Kay Amrine offers some good advice on this topic. She says, "When new people or kids came in to the house they would all get a mini lesson on how to handle the ferrets. What not to do, like screaming or poking the ferret. We would also tell them the funny things the ferrets would like to do and let them watch them first before handling them."

Opportunities for Children and Ferrets to Interact

Ferrets are a very misunderstood pet and there are many false assumptions about them in society. In fact, when many children are asked about ferrets they will give the response that "they smell" or "they bite." Allowing children to interact with ferrets allows them to understand what loving pets they are and helps dispel so many of the myths about them. There are opportunities for children to interact with ferrets, but many people do not know about them.

Ferret shelters often welcome children and their parents to come to shelters to volunteer. Older children can help with cage cleaning or nail clipping, and children of all ages love to watch the ferrets play with each other. With proper supervision at the shelter, children can learn how to interact with ferrets and they often will tell their friends how "cool" ferrets really are.

Many 4H groups have Pocket Pet chapters that allow ferrets. The children in these groups get to learn about all the different types of pocket pets and often share their experiences with others, do fair exhibits and show their pets. Many ferret shelter operators will take ferrets to chapter meetings and show the children how to properly handle ferrets and share information about ferret care.

Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts also offer a chance for children to get hands on experience with ferrets. Many troops will even ask ferret owners to bring their ferrets into meetings so the children can learn about ferrets,



Nikki Galdamez with Lily who earned a 2nd prize in a costume contest! (Mollie Nicholson)

ferret care, and how to properly handle ferrets. Kay Amrine took ferrets to her son's Boy Scout meetings to educate students about ferrets and one of the boys in the group even took his ferret to summer camp with him every year and kept it in the air conditioned animal area and children got to interact with the ferret.

Ferret shows are another way that children can interact with ferrets. Children can walk around the show hall with their parents and see all the different ferrets that are competing. They can talk to ferret owners, shelter directors, private breeders, and AFA judges.

Mollie Nicholson is a member of the American Ferret Association's Education Committee. When she first learned about ferret shows, she said, "Since I am 14, I was a little skeptical about going to a ferret show. I was worried that since I am young, everyone would talk down to me about ferrets. But they don't. They are all so nice and helpful. If you are a kid or your kid wants to show their ferret, they should! It is so much fun and you learn a lot!"



Mollie Nicholson and Cleo (Mollie Nicholson)

The bond between ferrets and children can be amazing, but as always, proper adult supervision is essential. Whether you are planning to introduce a ferret into your household or will be bringing a baby into a household with ferrets, doing your research ahead of time is very important both for the safety of your children and ferrets.

Visit the American Ferret Association to learn all about ferret care, foods & more!

The American Ferret Association PO Box 554 Frederick, MD 21705-0554

Phone: 1-888-FERRET-1 / Fax: 1-240-358-0673 / Web: www.ferret.org / Email: afa@ferret.org

