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JUST THE RIGHT SPOT: LITTER TRAINING YOUR FERRET

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Have you ever noticed how children often wish to go to the bathroom in a restaurant, store, or new place they visit? Seems like they have to check out and try out every potty they encounter. Well, ferrets are not too very different! Litter training a ferret can be frustrating because ferrets want to try out many new spots.

The first step in training a ferret where to appropriately potty is to select a litter box. A wide variety of litter box styles are available. You may need to try several to allow your ferret to choose the one with which they are most comfortable. Medium-size cat litter pans, high-sided square ones, and corner-shaped boxes are all options. You may even decide to choose more than one style as more suitable for the ferret's cage versus a box placed in a room. Next, the box needs to be filled with litter.

Recommended litter products for ferrets include those manufactured out of recycled newspaper, or a pelleted variety. Such products can be purchased in most pet stores. Do not use any of the following products, as they may cause respiratory distress or irritation to your ferret: scoopable litter, clay litter, cedar, or pine shavings. Many ferret owners will also choose to place "piddle pads" around the box to prevent messes, as ferrets dig and some will also "wipe" after leaving the box.

The next step is to identify where your ferret has already chose to use as a potty. Whether the spot is in his cage or the location is in a room, once a ferret shows you where he wants to go, that is where you should place the litter box. Few ferrets will choose to return to their cage to go, so pans must be made available in all spaces in which a ferret is allowed to roam and play. One important consideration in litter box placement is that ferrets may choose to mark their "territory" and choose to go in several places. It often seems they will choose their sites near doorways, corners, or under furniture, such as beds and sofas. This will necessitate placement of multiple boxes, as well as vigilance and cleaning to eradicate odors left behind if you attempt to train them not to use a selected spot. In addition to cleaning the sites of accidents, you can take preventive measures by placing objects such as ferret bedding, blankets, toys, tubes, baskets, or even furniture where you do not wish the ferret to go.

After you have placed litter pans in the appropriate places, the ferret must learn how to actually use the pan. This can be a challenge, as ferrets by nature are burrowing animals and may choose to play or even sleep in a litter pan. To deter this, place some of their feces in the box; this should help them learn that this is the correct location to go. When you see the ferret use to box correctly, offer positive reinforcement in the form of praise or even treats. The downside of offering treats is that some ferrets will learn to pretend to go and then expect something yummy. Always make certain the ferret has actually done the deed before treating him!

A ferret's litter box should be scooped or cleaned daily. However, it is a good idea to leave a small bit of feces or used litter behind, so that the ferret remembers the box is a toilet and not a play area. For ferrets who insist on digging in the litter box, provide them with an alternative opportunity to dig, such as in a dirt dig box, rice box, or pasta box.

One last important consideration in litter box training a ferret is to be mindful of its short digestive system. A ferret will eat and poop about every three to four hours. Often, ferrets will wish to go when they first wake up; in fact, many ferrets will leap out of their sleep sack or hammock in urgency to use the box. So, if you are letting your ferret out for some exercise and enrichment, make a pit stop in the litter box first. If your ferret does have an accident, clean it

thoroughly to help prevent repeat mistakes in the same spot. Never use negative reinforcement or punish a ferret for a mistake as, generally, they will not connect this with the action of going in an inappropriate spot.

The most important factors in successfully litter training a ferret are patience, consistency, and effective supervision. Once you get to know your ferret, you will easily be able to identify when he has to go and can assist him to the litter box. Encouraging use of the litter box prior to out-of-cage activity and providing enough boxes in ferret-selected places are key. If you do have ferrets who resist training, limit their free range time to an hour or two at a time so they are in their cage or room often enough to go in the correct place.