



Muzzle Training

Some dogs are unfamiliar with or have a negative response to basic handling performed at home or at the vet, causing them to bite or otherwise use their mouth dangerously. Whether this issue shows up for nail trims, baths, grooming, or even a basic exam, a simple solution is training your dog to wear a muzzle. This will help them get through stressful situations safely.

What is a muzzle?

A muzzle is a device placed over a dog's snout to keep them from engaging in dangerous activities with their mouths.

It is important to note that muzzles should never be used as punishment.

Myths about muzzles

1. **Myth:** Only dangerous dogs wear muzzles.
Truth: Any dog can become overwhelmed in a stressful situation, no matter how social or friendly. When continually placed in these stressful situations, they may escalate to snapping or biting.
1. **Myth:** A dog wearing a muzzle **has** bitten someone in the past.
Truth: Muzzles are used as a prevention tool to ensure the safety of the dogs and people around them.
2. **Myth:** Muzzles are cruel.
Truth: When used properly, a well-fitted muzzle shouldn't cause a dog pain or discomfort. The key is to gradually train your dog to wear it comfortably.

Types of muzzles

There are two types of muzzles commonly used for dogs:

- Soft muzzles, which are made out of cloth or mesh. They are more restrictive around the mouth and do not allow the dog to pant, which means they should only be worn for short periods. **Note: For short-snouted dogs like pugs, a breathable mesh muzzle is most appropriate.**

- Basket muzzles, which are made out of hard plastic, leather, wire or rubber. They allow the dog to pant and eat treats, which means they can be worn for longer periods.

Note: Gentle leaders (a type of head collar) are not muzzles. They are used to limit leash pulling. A dog can fully open their mouth while wearing a gentle leader.

How to muzzle train your dog

Desensitization:

Introduce your dog to the muzzle slowly, by first placing the muzzle nearby and doing positive things like offering treats and playing. Make sure to use high value treats that are going to be motivating to your dog. Once your dog is comfortable just seeing the muzzle, start feeding them through the muzzle by placing your fingers through the snout hole and feeding your dog. This will encourage them to put their nose into the basket to receive the treat.

Once your dog is comfortable putting their nose into the basket, work on increasing the amount of time they hold their nose there. Start with short sessions – 15 to 30 seconds - then gradually increase the duration, building up your dog's comfort level. Once they are comfortable with more time in the muzzle, begin to fasten the straps. Again, start with short sessions – 15 to 30 seconds - then gradually add more time.

Clicker training:

You can also use clicker training to muzzle train (see our handout “Dog Clicker Training”).

1. Start by clicking and treating your dog simply looking at the muzzle.
2. Then, graduate to clicking when your dog touches the muzzle with their nose.
3. Then, graduate to clicking for them placing their nose into the muzzle. Start with just a few seconds, then gradually add more time.
4. Then, graduate to fastening the strap and clicking for your dog remaining calm. Start with just a few seconds, then gradually add more time.

Note: No matter which method you use. Do not move onto the next step until your dog shows a positive response to the muzzle.

How to put on a muzzle

When your dog is ready to wear the muzzle, make sure the muzzle is placed securely and properly. The straps should be tight enough so that your dog cannot get the muzzle off by themselves, but loose enough that you can fit one finger between the strap and your dog's head. Read the instructions carefully if there is more than one strap.

If you are considering using a muzzle for any other reason beyond issues at the groomer, veterinarian or at-home handling sensitivities, please consult a professional dog trainer. It should also be noted that due to safety concerns, you should not leave your dog muzzled while unsupervised.