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The Muzzle – What Every Dog Should Accept

Introduction

How do you feel when you see a dog wearing a muzzle? Do you think that the dog is “bad” or “aggressive”? Do you immediately move away from the dog and handler?

These are common reactions and they are understandable. It is easy to conclude that the muzzle is used because the dog is aggressive and inclined to bite. This might be true, but the reality is far more nuanced and muzzles can be used in a variety of circumstances, even with dogs that aren’t reactive or “aggressive”.

This article is a primer on muzzle use and training. For more information, I recommend visiting The Muzzle Up! Project at www.muzzleupproject.com

What is a Muzzle?

In simplest terms, a muzzle is a covering that goes over a dog’s snout. However, there are many forms of muzzles. Some (e.g., soft muzzles) are designed only to *restrict* the dog’s use of his mouth, but do not entirely preclude biting. Other types of muzzles (e.g., hard muzzles) prevent the dog from biting. However, within this group, some allow for the intake of water and treats (given by the handler) and others completely deny any access to the dog’s mouth (e.g., so-called cage muzzles).

Muzzles can be made from a variety of materials (e.g., plastic, leather, wire, etc.) and can be secured by clips, snaps or buckles. Muzzles come in variety of sizes to fit most dogs. Some of the brachycephalic breeds (e.g., French Bulldogs, Boston Terriers, Pugs, etc.) or dogs with unusual features (or very small dogs) will require custom-made muzzles. Custom muzzles can truly be works of art, design and comfort.

A muzzle must be properly fitted and used for purpose. For example, a muzzle that does not allow the dog to drink water or take treats would be used only under specific conditions and for limited periods of time.

Why Would I Use a Muzzle?

One obvious reason to use a muzzle is to prevent your dog from accessing certain objects with his mouth. Of course, we might also want to avoid the possibility of a dog biting a person or another animal, but there are many other situations where a muzzle can be helpful:

- During specific examinations or touching (e.g., grooming, nail clipping, veterinary care, etc.).
- Transportation (e.g., on an airplane or train).
- Stressful situations such as going into crowds or busy areas.
- Outside activities where your dog might otherwise pick up or eat unwanted or dangerous items (e.g., goose poop, discarded chicken bones, poisonous plants).
- Off leash adventures when your dog might be tempted to attack a porcupine, skunk, etc.
- Previous bite history which requires use of a muzzle as a condition of the owner keeping the dog.

Interestingly, a muzzle can often allow certain dogs to be more composed and hence less reactive. This seemingly counterintuitive result is likely due to a combination of factors:

- It is well known that stress and anxiety in the handler readily transmits to the dog. With the protection offered by the muzzle, the handler has greater peace of mind and is often less nervous. This can lead to greater confidence, which the dog positively recognizes.
- When triggered (going “over threshold”), reactive dogs often redirect onto (i.e., bite) the thing closest to them (e.g., the leash, the handler’s leg, etc.). This is a reflex action that can sometimes produce a “feedback loop” of increasing distress. The muzzle prevents the dog from biting (which is stressful for the dog) and can allow him to retain some measure of control.

It is important to recognize that the use of a muzzle is often situational (context oriented). However, some dogs benefit from (or might require) a muzzle at all times when outside.

Does the Muzzle Scare or Hurt my Dog?

A muzzle that is properly fitted, appropriately introduced and accepted by your dog (i.e., “conditioned”) and used correctly will not adversely affect your dog in any way. In fact, it will protect your dog and others.

Once a dog is conditioned to a muzzle, it will be as natural and uneventful as his wearing a regular collar. You can also use a wide variety of training collars (e.g., gentle leaders) with a properly fitted muzzle.

An appropriate muzzle (the right type, non-abrasive materials and correctly fitted) won’t hurt or scare your dog. With proper conditioning and use, he will ignore it. He can still see, sniff and explore the world.

I Want or Need to Use a Muzzle. Where do I Begin?

Go slowly! Most dogs will not like an object placed on their noses or face. This is completely understandable. It is threatening at the very least, but more so it restricts a dog from using his primary means of defense (his mouth) in severe situations. Of course, it also is in the dog's line of sight and at first will be distracting. As such, the muzzle needs to be introduced slowly – it needs to be “conditioned”.

We start by simply leaving the muzzle in plain sight, perhaps near the dog's rest area. We want the dog to realize that the muzzle isn't offensive on its own. After a few days, the dog will likely ignore the muzzle as long as you ignore it. It isn't a toy and it isn't food.

Then we can hold the muzzle in one hand while giving our dog a treat. At this point, the muzzle is near the dog's face, but we are not putting the muzzle on him. This occurs for short periods (maximum of a few minutes), several times a day.

Next, we touch the muzzle to the dog's face in a calm environment and we reward the dog with treats and pleasing touches when he allows the contact.

At this point, we have to proceed with getting the muzzle on the dog's nose (but not yet attached around the neck). First, we get him to put his nose into the muzzle by holding it calmly with a highly valued treat at the end (peanut butter works well). We can even smear peanut butter onto the outside end of the muzzle so the dog must put his nose inside to lick it out. Keep it short, calm and praise your dog, but don't get overly excited. The muzzle is not a toy and it is not a game.

Once the dog puts his nose into the muzzle on his own, try putting the straps around his neck, but do not attach them. Simply hold them in place for a few seconds and then take the muzzle off. Treat your dog, act naturally and offer calm praise. Then you can get up and play with your dog or do something he really enjoys (e.g., belly rubs). He will begin to associate the muzzle with pleasurable activity.

Next, you snap the muzzle into place around the back of the neck and after a few seconds, take it off, reward your dog and play with him, giving praise and calming signals.

Slowly lengthen the time your dog is wearing the muzzle inside the house. With the muzzle on, have some quiet time with your dog gently stroking his neck and shoulders.

Once your dog has accepted the muzzle without fuss inside the house for at least 15 minutes off-leash (including normal relaxation time with you), you should attach the leash and walk around for a few minutes. Do it calmly, without fuss and ignore any pleas from your dog to remove the muzzle. When your dog settles (i.e., he isn't fussing about the muzzle and not rubbing your leg to get it off), then detach the leash and take off the muzzle and go about your business. Do not treat or reward your dog.

At this point, the dog has accepted the muzzle, but not necessarily for walking outside. Remember, we ignore fussing and only detach the muzzle when the dog is calm. It is a completely uneventful exercise. You wouldn't reward your dog for taking off his collar; at this stage, taking off the muzzle should be as natural as detaching a leash or taking off a collar.

Some dogs can pass through the above stages rather quickly and accept a muzzle within a single day! Other dogs might need a progression that can take a few weeks. Be patient. It is better to go too slowly than too quickly. We do not want our dogs to fear the muzzle. *A muzzle is not and must never be perceived by your dog as a punishment.*

So Far So Good, but Now We Have to Venture Outside With the Muzzle On

Now we must take the dog out into the “real world”. Above all, act normally! The muzzle allows your dog to enjoy the world (sniffing, etc.) and it isn’t harmful to him. He has already shown he accepts the device on his face. Just go out and start walking! Let him sniff and do his normal routine.

If your dog rubs his face on the ground or on your leg when starting the walk, don’t worry. This is quite normal. He is outside now and would prefer to have the thing off his head. Ignore the rubbing. Just say “let’s go” and keep walking. Redirect his attention elsewhere. He will soon be more interested in sniffing the ground and observing his environment.

What Should I Do If People Shy Away When my Dog is Wearing a Muzzle?

The short answer? Don’t do anything – just keep on walking, act naturally and enjoy the routine. Your dog doesn’t need the acceptance of others. The walk is about you and your dog; it isn’t about other people. At first, it is natural for us to feel embarrassed or apologetic when we meet others when our dogs are wearing muzzles. However, we don’t need to offer any explanations. We are acting as expert handlers! Everyone is safe and the training continues. Your walk is not about placating others – it is about you and your dog.

What if my Dog Reacts When Using the Muzzle?

If your dog has displayed reactivity before using a muzzle (e.g., to other dogs), continue your prior treatment plan (which should include systematic desensitization and counter-conditioning).

If the reactivity is new, then go home and restart the steps above. Do not proceed outside until your dog has fully accepted the muzzle. In this case, the dog may be stressed by wearing the muzzle outside when he encounters other people or dogs.

Be mindful that some dogs can react oddly or negatively when they see *other* dogs wearing muzzles. This is often because it is a new phenomenon for them; they simply haven’t encountered muzzles. Hence, the Muzzle Up! Project. Muzzles should be as natural for humans and dogs as collars.

Do I Always Have to Use a Muzzle When Other Dogs or People May be Present?

It depends on the dog and on the handler. Some dogs may always require a muzzle when outdoors (e.g., by legal order or for safety reasons) and other dogs may always benefit from it. Most certainly, many owners are more confident and less anxious knowing their muzzled dogs cannot cause physical harm or pick up dangerous objects.

If your dog needed a muzzle, the question to be asked isn’t “when to stop using it?”, but “why stop using it?”. If your dog is fully conditioned to a properly fitted, comfortable muzzle, is there a reason to discontinue its use?

All else equal, it is more pleasant for the dog, handler and other people if a dog is not wearing a muzzle. You can start with short walks without a muzzle, but you must be careful and safety is of primary importance. Please consult a professional who has behaviour modification if your dog shows reactivity (including biting).

In Summary

Muzzles are devices for dogs that prevent them from biting and/or accessing certain objects. When a dog is properly conditioned to a muzzle (i.e., accepts it without fuss), its use is as natural as using a collar. The muzzle is not a thing to be feared and it does not impair your dog from exploring the world. A muzzle is not a punishment, but simply a tool to help you and your dog to live more flexible, safe and happy lives.