

Muzzles: A Tool to Keep Everyone Safe

By Sherry Woodard

A muzzle can be a helpful tool to keep everyone safe while you're working to improve a dog's social skills or trying to manage aggressive tendencies. I have used muzzles to safely help many dogs improve their social skills around people and other animals. With a muzzle on the dog, you can make even a scary situation a positive, successful learning experience.

The number one reason that I recommend muzzle use is fear aggression. (For more on this subject, see "Dogs and Aggression.") Other reasons for teaching a dog to become comfortable wearing a muzzle are:

1. To safely handle a terrified or injured dog (either a rescued animal or your own) in an emergency.
2. To safely do a medical exam or groom a dog who is willing to bite.
3. To prevent injury to other animals who are allowed to approach a dog who is willing to bite.

Regarding the third reason: Some dogs will need to continue to wear muzzles out in public because many people are oblivious about aggression in dogs. They allow their off-lead dogs to run up to dogs on lead, not realizing that it's not always a safe thing to do.

Even dogs with poor greeting skills are sometimes allowed to run up and then snap at the dog on lead. A muzzle is a wonderful tool to show that you are being responsible – doing everything you can to keep everyone safe. You can then try to educate the people who have their dogs off-lead about the dangers of allowing their dogs to approach dogs they don't know.

Types of Muzzles

There are several types of muzzles:

- Plastic basket muzzle: My favorite for training.
- Leather muzzle: These vary in design, so be sure you choose the basket style so your dog can pant, drink and receive treats.
- Soft muzzle: My favorite in terms of comfort for the dog. I use this type once the dog has learned that having the muzzle on means she will be having fun. (Two types are Tuffie and Softie by ProGuard.)
- Grooming muzzle: I don't use these for training, since the dog can't pant, drink or eat treats with this muzzle on.



Basket muzzle



Tuffie muzzle



Softie muzzle



Grooming muzzle

- Metal basket muzzle: I don't recommend these because they can break at the welded spots, leaving sharp wire ends or edges that can injure the dog or you.
- Emergency muzzle: In an emergency, you can make a muzzle from gauze. (See "How to Muzzle a Dog in an Emergency.")

A good place to buy muzzles is www.morrco.com. If you use a muzzle on a dog, make sure it fits properly so the dog will be comfortable wearing it. Watch how the muzzle is riding on the dog's head – there should be no wear marks. Sometimes, moleskin must be added to protect the dog's fur and skin.



Metal basket muzzle

You'll also want to make sure that the dog can't escape from the muzzle. For extra insurance that the muzzle can't be rubbed or scratched off, you can attach two or more strings connecting the dog's flat collar to the muzzle (see photo at right). For even more security, attach a string from the top of the muzzle over the dog's forehead and attach it to the dog's collar (see photo below right).



Severity of Dog Bites

When it comes to dog bites, does the size of the dog matter? If a dog is willing to bite, a dog of any size can cause damage! Of course, a four-pound dog is not going to cause the same damage as a much bigger dog, but even a small dog can break the skin on a person.

I hear far too often that the bite was an accident caused by human error, but then I find out that it wasn't a first bite. If we don't help dogs who have these "accidents," we are being careless with their lives. Bites from dogs of any size to people's faces and bites to babies and small children are rarely excused. The consequences could be severe for a dog who bites a child or a person's face. See the box on the next page for a scale that's useful to trainers, animal behavior consultants and vets in judging the severity of a dog bite.



Wearing the Muzzle

Before you start training a dog with a muzzle, you'll need to get the dog comfortable with wearing the muzzle. Here are the steps:

1. Purchase an appropriately sized basket muzzle.
2. Allow the dog to see it and sniff it.
3. Feed treats very close to the muzzle, then have the dog touch the muzzle to receive the treat.
4. If the dog is relaxed around the muzzle, place a treat in through the front of the muzzle and slip it on. Allow the dog to take the treat and then remove the muzzle.

If the dog starts to panic or snaps, slow down and repeat steps 1 through 4 until the dog is comfortable.

5. Next, build up the time that the muzzle is on. Some dogs will be preoccupied with the muzzle at first, so before you start any training, you'll want to make sure the dog is able to focus on you while he's wearing the muzzle. Give lots of treats and work with the dog in your home or someplace with no distractions.

Training with the Muzzle

Once the dog is accustomed to wearing the muzzle, it's time to start the training. With the dog wearing the muzzle and focusing on you, teach and/or practice basic commands, giving praise and treats generously. (See "Teaching Your Dog Basic Commands.") Do whatever else the dog enjoys – playing with toys, petting – so the dog continues to associate wearing the muzzle with positive things. Again, do this work in your home or someplace with no distractions.

When you've mastered basic commands, start taking the muzzled dog out walking on lead in a low-traffic area (few people or other animals, depending on what the dog reacts negatively to). Give lots of great treats through the muzzle and allow the dog to enjoy sniffing, marking, rolling – whatever makes it a great walk for the dog.

Keep the walks brief: Use this short distance daily in different locations. When the dog is able to focus on you without becoming overly excited or fearful, try moving closer to whomever the dog has reacted negatively to (people or animals). Each dog will vary as to how quickly he/she can progress. Some dogs can move 10 feet closer at a time; for other dogs, two feet is a big challenge. You'll want to be careful to keep the distance between the dog and the people or animals large enough so the dog doesn't become overly excited or panicky.

If at any point the dog does become excited or fearful, move further away from the people or animals and raise the value of your treats. For example, if you normally reward with dog biscuits, give bits of cheese or cooked chicken instead. It's a good idea to carry a variety of treats at all times, since it may help the dog to stay focused or return to focusing on you instead of reacting negatively to people or other animals being nearby.

This standard scale was developed by Ian Dunbar to judge the severity of dog bites based on damage inflicted.

- **Level one:** Bark, lunge and no teeth on skin.
- **Level two:** Teeth touched skin, no puncture.
- **Level three:** One to four holes from a single bite; all holes less than half the length of a single canine tooth.
- **Level four:** Single bite, deep puncture (up to 1 1/2 times the depth of a single canine tooth). Wound goes black within 24 hours.
- **Level five:** Multiple-bite attack or multiple attack incidents.
- **Level six:** Missing large portions of flesh.

Anyone with sensitive skin – such as babies, young children and elderly people – will have more damage.

Also, by varying your treats, you can keep this daily activity interesting for the dog.

Next, build up the traffic by walking in places where more people or other animals are passing by. Recruit people that the dog is comfortable with and have them appear, approach and give treats. Even if the dog's challenge is not people, this is a great way to reinforce that good things happen when she's out wearing her muzzle.

The next step: Practice, practice, and more practice! Every day, work at getting closer to whomever the dog reacts negatively to – but do it at the dog's pace. If you try to progress too quickly, the dog will have a more difficult time focusing and changing his behavior and his emotions. Keep in mind that change will take time – and every dog is an individual. Genetics and life experience, or lack of experience, will be different for each dog.

For dogs who are willing to bite strangers: Strangers can become friends if you work slowly and carefully with the dog. Once the stranger can approach the dog safely, have the stranger start giving treats, then gradually move on to touching and petting the dog, holding the lead and walking with the dog. Don't remove the muzzle until the dog is clearly looking forward to spending time with this person. If you see any fear in the dog, slow down! Keep the dog muzzled while practicing in many different locations, including your home. Over time, you can build the dog's circle of friends for life.

For dogs who are willing to bite other animals: I have had lots of success with teaching these dogs to focus on me and walk past other dogs on lead, cats outside, and wildlife such as squirrels and rabbits. To be absolutely safe, always have a muzzle with you for emergencies.

To sum up: If there is any chance that a dog is willing to cause physical damage, please manage him/her with a muzzle to keep everyone safe. Dogs who lack social skills with humans and other animals can often make visible progress by wearing a muzzle while we help them change their associations from negative to positive. Remember to keep practicing and rewarding the dog. Your goal is a relaxed dog who is comfortable in the world and can enjoy a wide variety of experiences – doing more while staying safe.

For More Information

Check out the many behavior and training resources in You & Your Pets on the Best Friends website: www.bestfriends.org/theanimals/petcare/dogs.cfm.

Sherry Woodard is the animal behavior and training consultant at Best Friends. She develops resources and provides consulting services nationally to help achieve Best Friends' No More Homeless Pets mission.

Disclaimer: Best Friends Animal Society is not responsible for any injuries to anyone using the techniques described in this article. Any person using the techniques described here does so at his/her own risk.