

To Muzzle Or Not to Muzzle That Is The Question

By Almudena Ortiz Cué © 2008

We live in a society where the use of a muzzle is frowned upon by the general public. In my opinion and that of many trainers alike, muzzles are not only tools to keep everyone safe, but its use reflects a dog owner who is being proactive about his dog's behavior (possible bite) as well as responsible.

The use of a muzzle when there is any doubt that a dog might bite a person or another dog might be the difference between quality of life for their dog (i.e.: being able to go to a dog park, visit with family and friends etc.) and a life of confinement.

Types of muzzles:

There are two common types of muzzles:

1. A nylon muzzle also known as a groomer's muzzle or fabric muzzle and
2. A Basket muzzle.

The characteristics and uses of these muzzles are different. The nylon muzzle will keep the dog's mouth shut. A dog cannot drink, chew, bark or bite and he cannot pant! For this reason, groomer's muzzles should ONLY be used for short periods of times – such as visits to the vet, the groomer – and NEVER when a dog is going to exercise and needs to pant.¹

The basket muzzle looks like an open-weaved basket and it could be made of metal or plastic. Both muzzles secure around the dog's neck with two straps. This type of muzzle, allows the dog to open his mouth and pant thus is it the right choice for dogs who will be moving around when wearing a muzzle and who need to regulate their body temperature by panting.

Another advantage of the basket muzzle is that in some cases, they have side slots by which small pieces of food can be delivered as treats, which is an important consideration when doing training your dog to accept the muzzle.

How to fit a muzzle:

Muzzles come in different sizes and must be fitted correctly in order to be effective. It must be tight enough that it cannot move around the face but not so tight that it cuts into the dog's fur. The strap should be tight enough that you can barely get one finger between the strap and the dog's head.

How to introduce the muzzle:

Unless it is an emergency, do NOT put a muzzle on your dog without some previous desensitization to it. The goal is to introduce the muzzle to the dog at his own pace, so he will accept the muzzle in the future and not get frustrated when wearing one.

¹ Dogs, unlike humans, do NOT perspire with their whole body. They can only cool themselves by panting and by sweating through their paws.

How to introduce the muzzle cont:

By introducing the muzzle to your dog incrementally and pairing it with something that will create a very positive experience (high value treats) your dog will learn to accept – perhaps even love – wearing the muzzle.

Follow the next steps and work at your dog's comfort level. Patience and a calm environment (also you being calm) will go a long ways.

- Keep your training sessions short (3- 5 min. max) Best to have two or three training session a day than a very long one.
- Hold the basket muzzle with the opening face up on the ground.
- Place a treat (his favorite!) inside the muzzle
- Hold the muzzle still so your dog has to put his nose in the basket. Repeat a few times. If your dog will not put his nose inside, hold the muzzle steady on the floor and feed your dog a few treats a few inches away from the muzzle.
- Progress by bringing the treat closer to the muzzle until you are delivering treats next to the muzzle. If your dog seems comfortable with the above, position your hand at the opening of the muzzle.
- Progress to position treats inside the basket. Once your dog is okay taking the treats from the muzzle on the ground,
- Hold the muzzle a few inches away from him and repeat. If your dog is calm and taking the treats continue to move closer to him. Remember to proceed at your dog's pace.
- Once your dog is taking the treats inside the basket at nose level, you can hold the straps behind his head. Do not attach them. Hold for one second and then release.
- Work up to ten seconds one second at a time. Proceed ONLY if your dog is comfortable and eating the treats from inside the muzzle.
- Attach the straps and continue to give him treats through the slots of the baskets in a rapid succession. Gradually build up to longer periods of time with your dog wearing the muzzle.
- When you remove the muzzle, stop dispensing treats. The goal is to create an association of muzzle= treats.

The process might take days perhaps weeks which is fine. It is crucial that you work at your dog's comfort level so that your dog will associate the muzzle with good things such as treats, going to the park, engaging with other dogs.