

TRAINING YOUR DOG TO ACCEPT A MUZZLE.

We recommend a Leather Brothers Italian basket muzzle made of flexible polyethylene (plastic). (See illustration at right.) Italian Basket Muzzles discouraging biting, chewing and/or the swallowing undesirable objects.



A dog wearing a basket muzzle looks more frightening than one wearing a snug-fitting nylon muzzle, however, a basket style is safer for the dog as it allows the dog to pant (which is how dogs regulate their body temperature) and to drink water.

Preparatory Work

Before you begin muzzle training, identify several treats that your dog really enjoys because you are going to use treats to enhance your dog's muzzle training sessions. Ideally, training treats should be soft so that you can break them into small cubes and they won't crumble. Dogs can eat soft treats quickly, without having to stop and chew or lick crumbs up off the floor, so these treats make for faster, easier training. There are a number of steps you must follow to successfully introduce your dog to a muzzle, as follows:

One of the easiest ways to teach a dog to wear a muzzle is to do so with a clicker. What is a clicker? A clicker is a small, handheld plastic box with a metal tongue that, when depressed, makes a "click-click" sound. Clickers can be found at most major pet stores. It's not critical that you use a clicker to teach your dog to wear a muzzle, but you need a way to tell your dog immediately that it has something you want for it to do. The clicker is ideal for this as it precisely marks the exact moment that your dog does something you like. The clicker makes it easier to communicate more clearly with your dog, thus speeding up the learning process for your dog.

You can use a word, like "Yes!" if you don't want to use a clicker, but you'll still need to teach your dog what the word means using the steps below. Just replace the sound of the click with the word "Yes!" Say the word distinctively in a higher but happier pitch than normal so that it stands out from a "yes" in your normal conversations.

How the clicker works: Your dog must be introduced to the clicker so it can learn that every time it hears the click sound, it will get a treat (explained below.) When your dog learns the click sound is always followed by a treat, you can mark the exact moment your dog does something you like. If, for example, you want to teach your dog to sit, click the instant your dog's rump hits the floor and follow the click with a treat. After this happens a few times, your dog will learn that sitting earns it tasty treats.

In order to teach your dog that the click has meaning, you will need to spend some time teaching it that the sound of the click means a "treat" is forthcoming. The following steps should be spread over several sessions, one session per day, with each step being a separate session.

You are now ready to actually begin training your dog to wear a muzzle.

WARNING: The following steps are presented one step at a time. Do not try to move forward too quickly. Take as long as is necessary to proceed to the next step without upsetting your dog. It is more important that your dog calmly accept each step than it is to move forward too quickly.

Step One: Preparing to and Introducing the Clicker

Leash your dog and put the end of the leash under your foot with your dog standing or sitting in front of you. This is the position your dog should be in each time you begin the muzzle training exercises. Have a container of treats within reach as you will need treats for these exercises.

Place a treat in the palm of one hand and put the clicker in the other hand in such a way that you can click it immediately when necessary. If your dog turns to you and tries to get the treat, close your hand around the treat and wait until your dog stops trying (pawing, sniffing, mouthing, barking, etc.). You don't want to reward your dog for undesirable behavior(s).

As soon as your dog stops trying to get the treat, click once, open your hand and offer your dog the treat. If necessary, move the treat toward your dog's nose so it will take the treat. Put another treat in your hand and repeat. Once your dog immediately turns its head when it hears the click sound and looks for a treat, you are ready to introduce the muzzle.

Step Two: Introducing the Muzzle

To start, hold a treat and the clicker in one hand and the muzzle in the other. (This may take some practice initially, so try it without the dog first.) Hold the muzzle so that your dog will touch the open end first when the muzzle is offered to it. Offer the muzzle to your dog to smell and, the instant it does, click and treat your dog. Pull the muzzle back toward your body and away from your dog.

If your dog doesn't try to smell the muzzle when you offer it, rub some of the treat on it and offer it again. Now that it smells like the treats, your dog will probably sniff at it. If so, click and treat your dog and, again, pull the muzzle back toward your body and away from the dog. Wait 20 to 60 seconds and then present the muzzle again. Click and treat when your dog sniffs it. Repeat this exercise until your dog is reliably reaching toward the muzzle with his nose.

Step Three: Teach Your Dog to Push the Muzzle with its Nose

This requires that you change the criteria for success a bit. To start, begin a session by holding the muzzle toward your dog

as in the previous session and repeating the step two exercises, i.e., click and treat when your dog extends its nose and actually touches the muzzle. Repeat until your dog readily pokes the muzzle with its nose every time you hold it out (or a minimum of ten times).

Now you are going to raise the criteria again. Do not click immediately when your dog touches the muzzle with its nose, instead hold the muzzle still. Your dog will probably push at the muzzle with its nose, if it does, click and treat. Repeat until your dog readily pushes the muzzle with its nose every time you hold it out (or a minimum of ten times).

Step Four: Teach Your Dog to Put its Nose in the Muzzle by Moving the Muzzle

Dogs do not like to be “trapped” so this step is a bit tricky. You are again raising the criteria. This time, hold the muzzle toward your dog until it reaches toward the muzzle with its nose, when it does, shift the muzzle slightly so your dog’s nose slips part-way into the muzzle. Go slowly, it is critical that you resist the temptation to force your dog to accept the muzzle by pushing the muzzle to far at this point. Click when your dog’s nose goes part way into the muzzle. Repeat until your dog readily accepts this exercise (or a minimum of ten times.)

Step Five: Teach Your Dog to Put its Nose in the Muzzle Without Moving the Muzzle

You are again raising the criteria. Your goal is to help your dog figure out that he needs to put his nose into the muzzle himself. Do not force this step. Go slowly. Once your dog gets the idea, your goal is to have your dog extend its nose a little farther into the muzzle each time. When you click, your dog will naturally pull its nose out in order to receive the treat. That is what you want.

Step Six: Teach Your Dog to Keep its Nose in the Muzzle

Once your dog is sticking its nose all the way into the muzzle, teach it to hold its nose in there. Delay the click for a millisecond or two. Then click and treat. If your dog pulls his nose out before you click, do not click and treat. Instead, offer the muzzle to your dog again and wait for it to hold its nose in the muzzle for just a millisecond or two. Repeat until your dog readily accepts this exercise for up to ten seconds for a minimum of ten times.

Step Seven: Teach Your Dog to Accept the Straps on the Muzzle

The next step is to teach your dog to hold his nose in the muzzle while you strap it on. To do so, hold the clicker in one hand and the muzzle in the other. Put the treats somewhere convenient to you, like on a shelf or table, where you can reach them but your dog cannot.

While your dog is holding his nose in the muzzle, use the hand that’s holding the clicker to take hold of one of the neck straps. Click, let go and treat.

Continue repetitions over several sessions as you gradually delay the click and treat until you can take the strap and hold it up behind your dog’s ears, as though you are about to buckle or snap on the muzzle. Then, repeat the same steps, from the beginning, with the other strap.

Once you can move both of the straps at the same time. Take one strap in each hand and lift them up, as though you are about to buckle, snap or hook the straps together. Click and treat.

Continue repetitions gradually raising the criteria until your dog will stick its nose into the muzzle and hold it there while you fasten the neck straps behind your dog’s ears. As soon as you fasten the straps, click and unhook the straps and let your dog pull its nose out of the muzzle to get a treat.

Next, teach your dog to take treats that you pass through the side of the muzzle, i.e., long, skinny treats like Pup-peroni® and/or jerky treats work well.

Once your dog accepts the muzzle, teach it to accept the muzzle for longer periods of time. Start with 1 second, then 3 then 5, then 10, then 20, then 30, then 45, then 1 minute. Slowly increase the time from there, patiently building the length of time your dog will wear the muzzle without resistance before you click, remove the muzzle and treat it. If you proceed slowly enough, your dog will offer little if any resistance, although, in the beginning, it is normal for a dog to fuss a bit with the muzzle. If your dog does paw, claw at, or try to rub the muzzle off, stop it from doing so but do not scold the dog. It is not doing anything wrong. If necessary, distract your dog by giving it something else to do. You can say something to get its attention, physically stop it from trying to remove the muzzle, or do anything else that interests it as long as it does not try to remove the muzzle.

When your dog is able to wear the muzzle comfortably for two minutes, take it outside so it has other things to focus on besides wearing the muzzle while the two of you walk or play a game of chase. Once your dog can wear the muzzle in these situations, it is just a matter of letting your dog gradually become used to wearing the muzzle for longer periods in a variety of circumstances and locations.

When to Get Help - If you have trouble following any of the above steps outlined above or if you are afraid of your dog or the dog shows any signs of aggression during the muzzle training process, please call for assistance.

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