

MUZZLE UP

[February 28, 2017](#)

Training Tip Tuesday: Muzzle Up!

Muzzles aren't just for aggression!

In many countries, dogs are required to wear muzzles when they go out; it's just part of their attire – no different than a leash or collar. Some airlines require service dogs that are flying to be muzzled for the trip. If your dog is ever sick or injured; there is a very good chance he will be muzzled at the vets; if it is something he is used to it won't cause any additional stress. Muzzles can be an invaluable tool for training as well. If you are working through an issue; a muzzle can help keep stress levels down and keep everyone safe. Keep in mind, muzzles do NOT replace training! Putting a muzzle on does not give you permission to bring your dog into a situation you know will stress him out.

There are many different types of muzzles; the two most common are soft muzzles which keep the mouth closed and are designed to be used for short periods of time (at the vets office, or groomers) and a basket muzzle which allow the dog to pant, eat and drink but provide a barrier between his teeth and anything important! Make sure you select a style and size that is appropriate for your dog. If you need help fitting; contact a trainer!

Start getting your dog used to a muzzle as early as you can. Don't wait for an emergency to introduce it! Make it really fun and rewarding and go slow. Start with just seconds at a time; don't strap it on for an hour and expect him to just 'accept it'. You can feed treats and play games. One of my favorite suggestions is to take a little aluminum foil and wrap a basket muzzle. Use a mug or bowl (depending on the size) to keep it upright. Pour a little chicken broth in the bottom, only about 1/3" deep, and freeze it. You could also use peanut butter, yogurt, etc.. (pretty much anything you'd use to stuff a kong, you could use here!) When it's frozen, remove the foil and offer it to your dog as a treat; Encourage him to put his head in to get to the tasty treat at the bottom!

Make sure he wears his muzzle while he does fun things; not just when you anticipate a problem. Put a muzzle on to cuddle on the couch, or go for a hike. If the only time he sees a muzzle is when he goes to the vet; no matter how much time you've taken to make a positive association with the tool; he will quickly learn to associate it with a negative experience!

In the video below, Kod demonstrates the cone game. Not only is it a great foundation skill for future muzzle use; but it also serves to build confidence. If you watch closely, you'll see Kod actually closes his eyes when he pushed his nose deep in the cone. It takes a lot of confidence (and trust) for a dog to willingly accept something that interferes with his vision!

To teach the cone game we use successive approximations; which is a fancy way of saying ‘baby steps!’ You reward *anything* your dog does...looks at the cone, click & treat, bumps the cone with his nose, click & treat, etc.. you can put a treat in the cone to encourage him to investigate. As he learns interacting with the cone gets a reward, start raising the bar...only reward when he puts his nose in, then reward for his nose being a little further and so on. Once he gets that, you can gradually build duration.

Cone game: <https://youtu.be/DYACsrVdDdw>

For more information on muzzles; check out The Muzzle Up Project (<https://muzzleupproject.com/>), and if you see a dog with a muzzle; don’t judge or assume he’s bad! It’s time to overcome the stigma!