

# Texas Veterinary Behavior Services

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## Training Your Dog To Be Comfortable Being Muzzled

**Read each section of this handout carefully before you begin the training outlined in that section!!**

For simplicity, we will refer to a male dog in this handout.

### INTRODUCTION

A muzzle is a safety tool that keeps other dogs and/or humans safe when your dog is near these stimuli.

There is an unnecessary stigma attached to muzzles because 1) people think your muzzle-wearing dog is going to bite and/or 2) it is cruel to muzzle a dog. The latter will not be an issue if your dog is properly acclimated to wearing it. Our goal is to train your dog to be comfortable being muzzled.

Although it may seem unlikely at the moment, if you follow our instructions carefully, you will train your dog to happily wear a muzzle. When you pull the muzzle out, we want your dog to wag his tail and say, *"Oh, goodie! We're going to play the muzzle game!!!"*

We don't want the muzzle to stress or frighten your dog, especially around trigger stimuli, such as other dogs and vet visits.

Not all dogs will need the muzzle if the behavior modification and management steps you are being taught are carefully implemented. Nevertheless, it is important to train your dog to the muzzle and to maintain that positive association in case you ever do need to muzzle your dog for safety reasons.

The length of time it will take to properly train your dog to be comfortable wearing the muzzle is highly dependent on your dog's past experiences and training history. There are status checks at the end of each section that must be met before proceeding to the next section.

**Do NOT rush the process!**

### Materials Needed:

- A nylon sleeve style muzzle or a basket style muzzle
  - Nylon muzzles are best used for short-duration events (i.e., 30 minutes or less, such as a vet exam or grooming procedure).
  - Basket muzzles are best for longer duration events (i.e., 1 hour or more, such as a controlled dog exposure) as they allow the dog to breathe, eat, and drink more easily because they are roomier.
- Many small pieces of some of your dog's favorite food treats. We found string cheese or sticks of Pup-Peroni® are useful when training a dog to wear a basket muzzle, as you can stick the treat

through the muzzle. Other clients have found success when using baby food in a feeding syringe. (See the handout on *Maximizing Reinforcement* for more information on choosing treats.)

- A quiet, low distraction environment to begin the training.

**This exercise proceeds in the following sequential steps:**

1. **Sizing and fitting the muzzle**
2. **Training your dog to approach and eat a treat off the muzzle**
3. **Training your dog to place his nose into the muzzle**
4. **Training your dog to leave his nose in the muzzle (unstrapped) for 10-30 seconds**
5. **Training your dog to be comfortable while you handle the muzzle straps**
6. **Training your dog to be comfortable when you snap the muzzle on him**
7. **Training your dog to walk/move and be responsive to cues while wearing the muzzle**

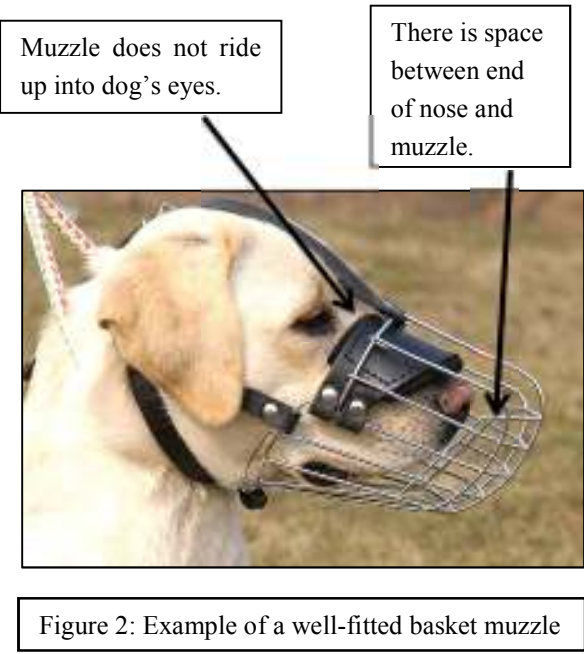
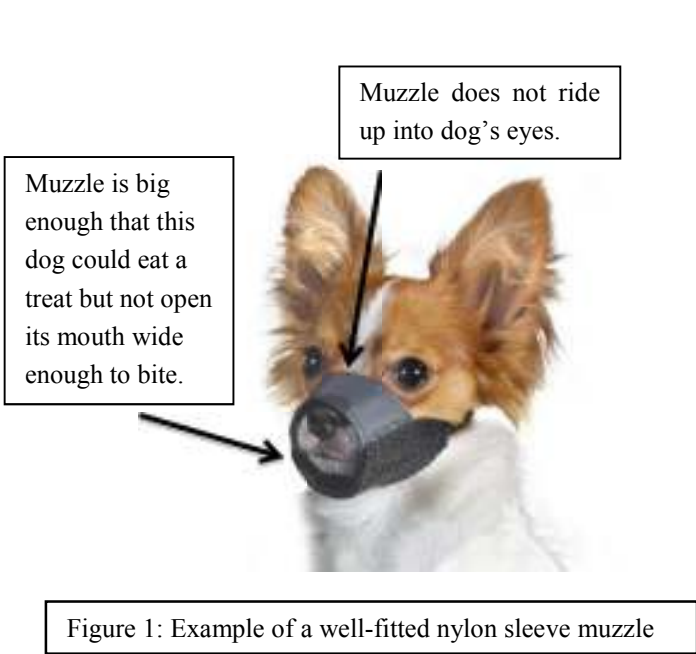
*Be sure to refer to the status check at the end of each section before progressing to the next step.*

## **TRAINING PROCESS**

### **Step 1: Sizing and fitting the muzzle**

**If you have any doubt if the muzzle fits him, take several pictures of your dog wearing the muzzle from different angles and email them to us for review.**

- The nylon sleeve muzzle should be just big enough that your dog can get his mouth open to pant, eat treats, and lap a small amount of water. A nylon muzzle should not let the dog's canine teeth to come apart far enough to allow your dog to grab a person or another dog.
- The basket muzzle should not pinch the sides of your dog's face, ride up into his eyes, or be so short that his nose touches the end of the muzzle. [See Figure 2.]
  - You are most likely to find a good fitting basket muzzle online.
  - Taking several measurements of your dog's head and face will make it more likely that you will find a good fit, but you might still need to purchase 3-4 sizes until you find the right one.
  - While each muzzle company may vary slightly in what they want you to measure, this website gives a good overall picture of what to look for:  
[http://www.fordogtrainers.com/index.php?main\\_page=page&id=239](http://www.fordogtrainers.com/index.php?main_page=page&id=239)
  - The steps for training a dog to wear a nylon or basket muzzle are the same. If you are having difficulty finding a properly fitted basket muzzle, go ahead and start the training with a nylon muzzle.
- These sizing criteria need to be met when the muzzle is actually on the dog. Distract him with canned cheese or peanut butter when you first strap the muzzle on him to determine its fit. If you cannot briefly get the muzzle on your dog, just start the training and decide later if it is a good fit.
- If the muzzle is too tight or small, the training will be more difficult and more stressful for the dog. For training purposes, it is better for the muzzle to be too large than too small.



**Step 2: Training your dog to approach and eat a treat off the muzzle**

Some dogs are very fearful when presented with a muzzle (especially if they have had a negative experience in the past). The first step of the muzzle training is to insure your dog will approach the muzzle in a relaxed and eager manner.

- Place the muzzle on the floor and toss 2-3 treats on top of it. Encourage your dog to approach the muzzle and eat the treats.
  - Repeat this step until your dog approaches the muzzle quickly in a relaxed and eager manner.
- After tossing 2-3 treats onto the muzzle, leave your fingers touching the muzzle while your dog approaches and eats the treats. This step insures your dog is comfortable approaching the muzzle while your hand is on it.
- Hold the muzzle in your hand and place a treat on top of it. Extend the muzzle out toward your dog on the edge of your personal space bubble. If the dog already knows how to target items with his nose, you can cue him to target the muzzle.



***Step 2 Status Check: Your dog should approach the muzzle promptly in a relaxed and eager manner and eat the treat every time you present it before you move on to Step 3.***

*If at any time you have difficulty with the training, please contact us for assistance.*

**Step 3: Training your dog to place his nose into the muzzle**

***Always present the muzzle on the edge of your personal space bubble, but 2-4 inches from your dog's nose. Do not push the muzzle right into his face!***

1. Cradle the muzzle in one hand, as seen in Figures 3A-B.
  - a. Be careful that you do not unintentionally block the opening of the muzzle with your hand or fingers.
2. With your other hand, push/hold the treat all the way through the muzzle, as seen in Figure 4.



Figure 3A



Figure 3B



Figure 4

- a. Present the muzzle, following the instructions at the beginning of this section.
    - i. Many dogs quickly become enthusiastic to play the “muzzle training” game and tend to crowd you. If your dog crowds your personal space, body block him back before presenting the muzzle.
  - b. As the dog moves his head forward to eat the treat, click, give him the treat, and immediately pull the muzzle away.
    - i. *A note about clicking—it is often easier to use a tongue click or word (e.g., “Yes”) to mark the behavior, since both of your hands are occupied and cannot hold a clicker.*
  - c. Repeat until he approaches the muzzle in a relaxed and eager manner for 4-5 consecutive trials.
3. Hold the treat so it is in line with the muzzle opening, as in seen in Figure 5.
    - a. Present the muzzle, following the instructions at the beginning of this section. As soon as your dog approaches the muzzle, click, give him the treat, and immediately pull the muzzle away.
    - b. Repeat until he approaches the muzzle in a relaxed and eager manner for 4-5 consecutive trials.
  4. Hold the treat so it is 30% inside the muzzle.
    - a. Present the muzzle, following the instructions at the beginning of this section. As soon as his nose enters the muzzle, click, give him the treat and immediately pull the muzzle off.
    - b. Repeat until he places his nose into the muzzle in a relaxed and eager manner for 4-5 consecutive trials.
      - i. We want your dog to begin to “look” for the muzzle opening.
  5. Continue the above steps but progress through the training by moving the treat further into the muzzle in 20-30% increments.



Figure 5

- a. Do not move your dog to the next stage of the training until he approaches the treat at the current position in a relaxed and eager manner for 4-5 consecutive trials.
  - b. The goal is to hold the treat 1 inch outside the opening of the muzzle so the dog actually has to push his nose all the way into the muzzle to get the treat, as seen in Figure 6.
6. If at any point, your dog tries to circumvent the muzzle opening to get to the treat (rather than pushing his nose through the muzzle), remove the muzzle, body block him back, and then re-present the muzzle.
  7. **Be careful that you do not push or force the muzzle onto your dog.** We essentially want to train your dog to muzzle himself!



Figure 6



**Step 3 Status Check: Your dog should approach and stick his nose all the way into the muzzle in a relaxed and eager manner anytime you present it before you move on to Step 4.**

*If at any time you have difficulty with the training, please contact us for assistance.*

#### **Step 4: Training your dog to leave his nose in the muzzle (unstrapped) for 10-30 seconds**

***Always present the muzzle on the edge of your personal space bubble, but 2-4 inches from your dog's nose. Do not push the muzzle right into his face!***

1. Increase the time the dog leaves his nose in the muzzle (unstrapped). We want the muzzle extended out toward your dog to be a cue for him to leave his nose in it for however long the muzzle is presented.
  - a. Hold 2 treats in one hand.
  - b. With your other hand present the muzzle, following the instructions at the beginning of this section.
  - c. Hold the treat 1-2 inches from the opening of the muzzle so the dog actually has to push his nose into the muzzle to get the treat, as seen in Figure 6.
  - d. As your dog pushes his nose all the way through the muzzle, praise him and give him one of the treats.
  - e. ½ second after the first treat, give him the second treat for keeping his nose in the muzzle.
  - f. After the second treat, pull the muzzle off his nose before he has a chance to back his head away from the muzzle.
  - g. Repeat until he is comfortable leaving his nose in the muzzle for 4-5 consecutive trials of the steps given above.
2. Hold 2 treats in one hand.
  - a. With your other hand present the muzzle out to the dog as before.
  - b. Hold the treat 1-2 inches from the opening of the muzzle so the dog actually has to push his nose into the muzzle to get the treat, as seen in Figure 6.
  - c. As your dog pushes his nose all the way through the muzzle, praise him and give him one of the treats.
  - d. Pull the treat hand back away from the muzzle about 1-2 inches and then immediately move your treat hand back to the dog.

- e. If he leaves his nose in the muzzle during this time, immediately click, give him the second treat, and then pull the muzzle off him.
  - f. If he pulls his head back and out of the muzzle before you give him the second treat, leave the muzzle extended out toward him.
  - g. Give him 1-2 seconds to put his nose back into the muzzle.
  - h. If he does, click, give him the treat, and remove the muzzle.
  - i. However, if he does not put his nose back into the muzzle, return to Step 3 for a few trials until he readily places his nose into the muzzle whenever it is presented.
3. Over training sessions, gradually increase the time he holds his nose in the muzzle by ½-1 second increments.
    - a. You can build duration one of two ways:
      - Increase the number of treats you give him sequentially during a trial
      - Or increase the pause between each individual treat.
    - b. Do NOT increase both factors (i.e., number of treats and time between treats) during the same trial.
  4. **Be careful that you do not push or force the muzzle onto your dog.**
    - a. This can cause the dog to become scared and move away.
    - b. It is helpful to avoid this problem by resting your elbow on your leg, as seen in Figure 7.



Figure 7



**Step 4 Status Check: Your dog should be comfortable wearing the muzzle for 10-30 consecutive seconds with a treat being delivered every 2-3 seconds before you move on to Step 5.**

*If at any time you have difficulty with the training, please contact us for assistance.*

## **Step 5: Training your dog to be comfortable while you handle the muzzle straps**

***Always present the muzzle on the edge of your personal space bubble, but 2-4 inches from your dog's nose. Do not push the muzzle right into his face!***

1. Present the muzzle, following the instructions above.
2. Hold the treat 1-2 inches from the muzzle opening so your dog has to push his nose completely into the muzzle to reach the treat, as seen in Figure 6.
  - a. Give him the first treat.
  - b. As your dog is eating this treat, calmly slide the hand that was initially cradling the muzzle up the muzzle strap and hold it at the back of his neck so he feels the tension of the strap across his neck.
  - c. ½ second later, click, give him another treat, and then pull the muzzle off his nose before he has a chance to back his head away from the muzzle.
  - d. Repeat until he leaves his nose in the muzzle while you gently hold one strap at the back of his neck for 1 second during 4-5 consecutive trials.
3. Repeat the above steps, but switch hands and slide the other muzzle strap back toward his neck. (This is most easily done if you switch the hand that initially cradles the muzzle.) For example, when you handle the right strap of the muzzle, start out by cradling the muzzle with your right hand.)
4. Continue practicing this step (with each strap!) until your dog is completely comfortable with your hand moving back toward his neck with the strap for 4-5 consecutive trials.



**Step 5 Status Check: Your dog should be comfortable placing his nose in the muzzle and letting you handle either strap (but only one at a time) before you move on to Step 6.**

*If at any time you have difficulty with the training, please contact us for assistance.*

## **Step 6: Training your dog to be comfortable when you snap the muzzle on him**

***Always present the muzzle on the edge of your personal space bubble, but 2-4 inches from your dog's nose. Do not push the muzzle right into his face!***

1. Present the muzzle, following the instructions above.
  - a. Hold the treat so your dog has to push his nose completely into the muzzle to reach the treat.
  - b. As soon as his nose enters the muzzle, click and give him a treat.
  - c. As he is eating the treat, calmly slide one hand down a muzzle strap and move it to the back of his neck. Click and treat him.
  - d. Continue to gently hold this strap near the back of his neck.
  - e. ½ second later, click, and give him a treat.
  - f. As he is eating this treat, calmly slide your other hand down the remaining muzzle strap and move it to the back of his neck.
  - g. Transfer this muzzle strap to your other hand so that both muzzle straps are held at the back of his neck with one hand.
  - h. Click, give him a treat with your free hand and then pull the muzzle off his nose before he has a chance to back his head away from the muzzle.
  - i. Repeat until he leaves his nose in the muzzle and his head remains stationary while you gently hold both muzzle straps at the back of his neck (with one hand) for 1-2 seconds at a time during 4-5 consecutive trials.
  - j. Repeat the above steps but once you have both muzzle straps at the back of his head, slowly snap on the muzzle.
  - k. Try to muffle the sound of the muzzle snapping together as this sound can sometimes startle a dog.
  - l. ½-1 second after snapping the muzzle onto your dog, click, give him a treat, unsnap the muzzle, and then pull it off your dog's nose.
  - m. Do not give him any treats once the muzzle has been removed.
  - n. Repeat until he remains relaxed for 4-5 consecutive trials of your snapping the muzzle on him and leaving it for ~1 second.
2. Repeat the above steps but increase the amount of time your dog wears the muzzle (while it is snapped on) in 2-4 second increments.
  - a. Do not increase the amount of time you request your dog to wear the muzzle until he remains relaxed while wearing the muzzle for "X" seconds for at least 4-5 consecutive trials.

**Another option for snapping the buckle: Your dog should be lying down to use this option. Dump 4-5 treats right in front of your dog's nose on the ground so that he just has to dip his head to eat them. While your dog is eating the treats, pick up the remaining muzzle strap with your other hand and slide it toward the back of his neck. Snap the two straps together. Pull your hands away. When he finishes eating the treats and lifts his head up, click, and immediately give him another treat. While he is eating this treat, unsnap the muzzle and pull it off his nose.**



**Step 6 Status Check: Your dog should be comfortable with your snapping the muzzle on him and leaving it for approximately 30 seconds. If your dog can do this, move on to Step 7.**

*If at any time you have difficulty with the training, please contact us for assistance.*

### **Step 7: Training your dog to walk/move and be responsive to cues while wearing the muzzle**

***Always present the muzzle on the edge of your personal space bubble, but 2-4 inches from your dog's nose. Do not push the muzzle right into his face!***

1. Present the muzzle, following the instructions above.
  - a. Warm up your dog by rewarding him for putting his nose into the muzzle.
  - b. Repeat for 2-3 trials.
  - c. During the next trial, snap the muzzle on him.
  - d. Click and give him a treat.
2. Hold a treat on your hand or place a treat on the ground about 6-12 inches away from him.
  - a. Place the treat far enough away from your dog that he must take 1-2 steps toward the treat to reach it.
  - b. Right before he approaches the treat, click, and allow him to eat it.
  - c. After he eats this treat, place another treat 6-12 inches away from him. Encourage him to walk forward to eat it.
  - d. Right before he approaches the treat, click, and allow him to eat it.
  - e. Repeat these steps 3-6 times, then take the muzzle off and give him a short break.
  - f. Repeat until he moves forward immediately and eagerly to eat the treats at this distance during 4-5 consecutive trials.
3. The next step involves placing the treats slightly further away from him. [Note: you could eliminate words in the steps below by referring back to the above sequence and just noting that this time the instructions are for the longer distance.]
  - a. Place the treat 18-24 inches away from him.
  - b. Right before he approaches the treat, click, and allow him to eat it.
  - c. After he eats the treat, place another treat 18-24 inches away from him.
  - d. Right before he approaches the treat, click, and allow him to eat it.
  - e. Repeat these steps about 3-6 times, then take the muzzle off and give him a short break.
  - f. Repeat this step until he moves forward immediately and eagerly to eat the treats at this distance during 4-5 consecutive trials.
4. Stand 2 feet away from your dog.
  - a. Extend your hand with a treat in your palm.
  - b. Encourage your dog to walk forward.



- c. Right before he approaches the treat, click, and allow him to eat it.
  - d. Take a step away from your dog and extend your hand out toward him with another treat on your palm.
  - e. Right before he approaches the treat, click, and allow him to eat it.
  - f. Repeat this step about 3-6 times, then take the muzzle off and give him a short break.
  - g. Repeat until he moves forward immediately and eagerly to eat the treats at this distance during 4-5 consecutive trials.
5. When he will quickly walk forward to take a treat out of your hand, reward him for coming to you by letting him eat the treat out of your hand. Then cue him to “sit” or “down”.
    - a. Note that even if your dog responds consistently to verbal cues, you may need to back up in your training by luring him to “sit” or “down” with a treat.
      - i. For many dogs knowing how to “sit” while muzzled is completely different from knowing how to “sit” without a muzzle.
    - b. Click him as soon as he moves into position.
    - c. After clicking, toss a treat nearby.
      - i. This not only rewards the approach but it also encourages him to get up out of the current position, which resets him for the next trial.
    - d. After he eats the treat, cue him to “sit” or “down” again.
    - e. Click him as soon as he moves into position.
    - f. After clicking, toss a treat nearby.
    - g. Repeat the cue approximately 3-6 times, then remove the muzzle and give him a short break.
  6. Begin asking him to do different cues (e.g. “come,” “walk,” “heel,” hand target, or any other tricks) with the muzzle on so he will willingly walk and work while he is wearing it. Practice cuing any behavior the dog already knows while he is muzzled.

**Goal: Your dog will work for at least 10 minutes with the muzzle on.**

*If at any time you have difficulty with the training, please contact us for assistance.*

## FINAL NOTES

Once your dog is comfortable wearing the muzzle, you should continue to build positive associations to it by having him wear it during his favorite activities (e.g., during car rides, walks, or training sessions, etc.) Your dog should have a 1:5 ratio—for every “scary” incident your dog experiences while being muzzled (e.g., at the vet), he should experience 5 other really fun, positive episodes. This insures that your dog will continue to be comfortable being muzzled.

