

Conditioning a Positive Emotional Response to a Muzzle

BY PAT MILLER

Trainers often use the term “desensitization” when talking about introducing your dog to a new piece of equipment, such as a muzzle. In reality, when it’s something new, you’re conditioning your dog’s *initial* response to the new object. The desensitization procedure applies when your dog *already* has an association with the object – usually a negative one – and you’re working to change the association to positive.

It’s a lot easier (and wiser) to start by creating a positive association with a muzzle for your dog (or any other stimulus!) than it is to have to backtrack and create a new one. You’ll have the most success if you and your dog can make a game of it rather than getting all worried and serious. Be upbeat and cheerful rather than serious or worried, and encourage your dog to be playful as you do this.

Your goal is to convince your dog that “muzzle = good stuff!” You know how your dog’s eyes light up when you pick up her leash, her ball, or her favorite tug toy? That’s what you want to see when you pick up her muzzle. Feel free to incorporate the clicker to mark your dog’s behavior as soon as she starts offering deliberate muzzle-related behaviors.

Start by purchasing an-appropriately-sized basket muzzle. Work with your dog, in several short sessions (5-15 minutes) throughout each day – the more *short* sessions, the better! Here are the steps of a sample conditioning protocol:

1. Hold up the muzzle, feed your dog a high value treat. Repeat this step until your dog brightens and looks for the treat when you hold up the muzzle.

2. Let your dog sniff the outside of the muzzle (or invite her to target to it) and feed a treat. Repeat until she’s happily offering to sniff/target and then looking for her treat.

3. Invite her to sniff/target the edge of the muzzle opening. Feed a treat. Repeat until she’s happily offering to sniff/target, then looking for her treat.

4. Encourage her to put her nose into the muzzle opening by sticking a treat to the inside, near the opening. Repeat until she’s eagerly putting her nose into the opening, then gradually move the treat deeper into the muzzle, with numerous repetitions at each new increment, until she’s happy to put her nose all the way in.

5. Increase duration by feeding several treats each time while her nose is all the way in, gradually increasing delay between treats, until she’ll voluntarily hold her nose in the muzzle for 5-10 seconds waiting for the next click and treat.

6. While she’s holding her nose in the muzzle, clip the strap behind her head, click, treat, and release the strap. Gradually increase the length of time you leave the muzzle clipped on, with random reinforcement, and you’re done!

If at any time during the protocol your dog resists the muzzle, back up to a point where she’s happy again, and proceed more slowly. When you have completed the process and your dog is happy to wear her muzzle, be sure to play muzzle games with her from time to time to maintain the positive emotional response. If you put it on her only when she’s going to see the vet, you can poison the association you worked so hard to attain.

For a fantastic video depiction of noted trainer and author Jean Donaldson conditioning a positive emotional response to a head halter with her Chow, Buffy, see abrionline.org/videos.php and click on “Conditioning a Positive Emotional Response.”