

Muzzle Training Behaviour Modification Protocol

Procedure

Begin training sessions after a long walk, exercise or play so that the dog is happy and tired. Choose a quiet and calm environment. Training sessions should be frequent but short. Spend time building confidence at each stage before moving on to the next. Look for relaxed and comfortable body language. Backtrack to the previous step if more time is needed. Always allow the dog to control the speed at which we progress.



1. Show the dog the muzzle, followed immediately by a high-value reward (food treats or playing with a toy). Use a rapid rate of reinforcement while the muzzle is present. Once the muzzle disappears, reinforcement stops. The muzzle must always appear before the reward so it becomes a predictor of good things.
2. Begin clipping the muzzle around the neck of the dog like a regular collar without placing the dog's mouth inside the muzzle. Begin treating. You can also roll treats a short distance away in different directions to create movement and play. Remove the muzzle before the dog becomes anxious or wary, and stop delivering treats.
3. Place treats inside the muzzle (cupped in your hand) and allow the dog to put their nose in the muzzle to eat the treat.
4. While the dog is eating out of the muzzle, gently pull it away from them. Ideally, they will continue eating and follow the muzzle with their face inside it. This way, they avoid developing the habit of pulling their face out of the muzzle. Always allow the dog to place their face into the muzzle.
5. While the dog's face is still in the muzzle, deliver food through the openings in front to ensure the dog holds their face in position for a longer period of time. Squeezable tube treats work well. If using a plastic muzzle, you can cut a slightly bigger hole for passing small treats.
6. Begin to move the straps of the muzzle around the back of the dog's neck. Do not clip the muzzle closed; rather, get the dog comfortable with your hands and the muzzle clip around the back of their head.
7. Begin to clip the muzzle strap. Continue reinforcing with treat rewards. Keep the muzzle straps fairly loose at this stage.
8. Once the dog is comfortable with you clipping the strap, adjust it for the correct fit. Continue reinforcing.
9. Always end a training session on a positive note or play to relieve any stress.

Do not remove the muzzle if the dog begins to paw at it. Instead, distract them by asking for simple behaviours that they enjoy and are familiar with (i.e., "sit" or "look"), reward for completion, then remove the muzzle.

Continue muzzle training at times when it isn't needed so that it becomes a normal activity, rather than a predictor of uncomfortable experiences. Begin to generalize muzzle training in different environments so when you do actually need to use it, for example during a vet exam, the dog is accustomed to wearing it.

