



Apache (right) wearing his muzzle after being conditioned to wear it with positive reinforcement techniques.

Busting the Muzzle Myth: Why Training All Dogs to Muzzles Makes Good Sense

By Rachel Brix, BSEd, CPDT-KA

Walking the busy streets of our small tourist town with my dog, the looks on people's faces range from confusion, to disgust, to laughing, to disapproval to open-mouthed wide-eyed shock. The cause of these contorted faces? A dog wearing a muzzle.

Let's face it: we don't see very many dogs in public wearing what looks to most people like some sort of medieval torture device. And when people who aren't dog professionals in-the-know see us, they think I'm mean, my dog is dangerous, or something else other than what's true. I've heard people mutter "poor dog" or "he must be aggressive" or even come right out and ask, "Why is that dog wearing a muzzle?" Since stopping for a long conversation isn't something my dog can do just yet, I give them the short version: He's in training and we're keeping everyone safe. But as trainers shouldn't we be doing more overall, especially considering muzzles are a trusted, effective and necessary tool?

Truth be told, long before I became a trainer, I was one of those open-mouthed gawkers. I stereotyped muzzle-wearing dogs as "aggressive," and wondered what the heck the owner was doing to the dog that it needed a cage on its face. But last year I adopted a dog named Apache, a long-termer at our rural Arkansas shelter. We were head-over-heels for each other and had worked together on

and off for his 2 ½ years there. A bully breed mix, about 4-to-5 years old with a multiple bite history, management labeled him “unadoptable” and relegated him to a lonely isolated corner kennel. Not wanting that sentence for him, I finally decided to take a chance and bring him home.

He’d had four (reported) bites, Levels 2 through 4 on the Dunbar Scale. I heard the term “zero dog” at a recent conference, and this would describe my boy perfectly—in the fourth quadrant of “no warning/bite” and the most difficult to rehab. Of course he gives a warning, but it’s so subtle it’s tough to train; even with my decade of experience, the help and tutelage of a CDBC, CBCC and with Grisha Stewart’s awesome BAT 2.0. But we’re working on it. And he’s improving.

Granted, most dogs don’t fit into Apache’s category—but to the general public every dog might as well be a “zero dog.” One look at a muzzled dog (especially a bully breed mix like mine) and he’s automatically labeled “aggressive” and the human “mean” (or worse). But there are many reactive dogs who do not wear muzzles, but probably should.

Moreover, dogs who ingest things they shouldn’t can also benefit from a muzzle. I had a client whose Doberman puppy took to eating rocks every chance he got. At first, they had reservations about putting the dog in a muzzle, but after emergency surgery, they decided it was in everyone’s best interest he wear one. One of their initial issues was choosing which type of muzzle to use. As dog professionals, we should be versed in which types of muzzles are best; the most recommended dog-friendly muzzle is a rubber basket muzzle. They’re lightweight and flexible, and wearing one doesn’t prevent a dog from receiving food, drinking and panting. Apache’s muzzle was less than \$20 and took us about two weeks to train. He knows when he puts it on, not only does he get yummy food, but also that we’re leaving our property to go on an adventure.



The fact is, all dogs should be trained on wearing a muzzle. Unfortunately, most dogs never even see a muzzle, let alone receive training on wearing one. And most dogs never bite; even though all dogs could at any given time. In her iconic book “The Culture Clash,” Jean Donaldson offers the sobering reality that many dogs “simply never meet up with the particular combination of elements that would cause them to bite, but this is a stroke of luck. There is no qualitative difference, or even necessarily a quantitative difference, between their temperament and the repeat biter next door.”

Donaldson goes on to assert “the number one bite provocation in domestic dogs is some variation on a behavior we humans consider unprovocative, or even friendly: approaching or reaching out with a hand.” So, I suppose what’s surprising is not the number of bites, but that there aren’t more, especially considering we’ve all witnessed many people who approach dogs uninvited and/or reach out to pet them; the dog doesn’t know they mean no harm and the general public simply doesn’t know better.

Dog bite statistics are akin to fuzzy math: while the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports approximately 4.7 million dog bites per year, only about

800,000 require medical care. These numbers don’t include bites that go unreported, which are usually the Level 1 bites that may not even require a Band-Aid. And most bite victims are among our most vulnerable: children and the elderly, and they’re usually bitten by dogs they know. Therefore, keeping our dogs and the people they love safe makes good training sense. Typically, the only time most dogs see a muzzle is in an emergency, when the likelihood of a bite is even more probable.

It’s time to break the stigma, and it’s our job as professionals in an unregulated industry to do it. Our education and experience make us not only uniquely qualified, but also appropriately responsible for educating and guiding the public, thereby advocating for dogs in the process. Muzzles keep everyone safe—the people and dogs in vicinity of a dog with a bite history and the owner of the dog with a bite history—not only from possible litigation, but also from redirected aggression, of which Apache is prone.

Yet there’s millions of unmuzzled dogs who could bite and then continue with owners who may or may not be prepared to prevent future bites; be abandoned; be relinquished to shelters that may or may not have the resources necessary to help dogs with bite histories, or be euthanized.



The author used positive reinforcement to help Apache learn to accept wearing his muzzle out in public.

I was recently at the front counter of a vet's office when a woman came in dragging a stiff-legged and cowering enormous American bulldog-looking dog on a flimsy leash. The dog's nails were clearly long overdue for a trim (the apparent reason for its visit), but the dog was so petrified, it broke away from its human and dashed for the door. The owner attempted to subdue her petrified pooch as a vet tech dashed into the back, reappearing with muzzle in hand. She tried in vain for a several miserable minutes to muzzle the dog. Ultimately, everyone gave up and the dog left not only with an obviously negative experience, but without the desperately needed nail trim. It all seemed like a scene from a bad movie but served as a stark reminder of many things: the staff could clearly benefit from fear-free training; dogs need their humans' help to have positive experiences at the vet, and muzzles should be trained, not forced. As trainers we should consider adding muzzle training to our curriculums. Everyone was extremely lucky this poor dog chose not to bite.

Maureen Backman, M.S., CTC, PCT-A, is an honors grad from Jean Donaldson's Academy for Dog Trainers who innovated the Muzzle Up! Project a few years ago, which aimed to educate the public about

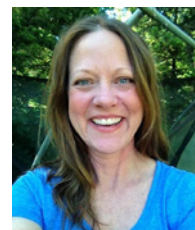
dog behavior while reducing the stigma associated with dogs who wear muzzles. While Backman has since closed the business end to return to grad school, the website is still active and contains an extensive collection of resources for both trainers and the general dog-owning public.

Training a dog to a muzzle is, of course, not as easy as teaching them to sit or rollover but should be just as fun and well reinforced. On her blog, Backman describes, "The presence and strength of the "yippee!" response is the single most important factor in muzzle training. If your dog goes "uh oh," "ho hum," or "I'm not sure about this" when he sees the muzzle, it doesn't matter how great the rest of your training plan is; the dog hasn't made a strong, accurate association between the muzzle and the good stuff and without that association, your training will hit roadblocks."

Apache may always have to wear his muzzle in public. And that's okay. Other people mind it much more than he does. I'm learning to mind it less. As dog professionals we should actively assert to remove the stigma associated with muzzles and instead add acclimating our dogs to a muzzle as part of our classes—even adding it to our Responsible Pet



Owners' checklist—and advocate for their usefulness. After all, as Ben Franklin acknowledged, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."



Rachel Brix, BSEd, CPDT-KA, has been training dogs and teaching people for a combined 20 years. Also, a writer and speaker, she has spoken

twice at the annual APDT conferences and has also been nominated back-to-back years for a Dog Writers Association of America award. She owns and operates Percy's Playground boarding and training facility in Eagle Rock, Missouri, with her husband, who also helps her train—and spoil—their six rescue animals.

Resources

<https://muzzleupproject.com/>
<https://barksfromtheguild.com/2017/12/10/making-peace-with-muzzles/>
<https://www.petprofessionalguild.com/Muzzle-Training>
<https://bestfriends.org/resources/muzzles-tool-keep-everyone-safe>