

# Training Dogs (and Cats) to Love Wearing a Muzzle\*

By Dr. Sophia Yin

## OVERVIEW

We can train animals to love procedures and other things that they dislike or even hate by combining the process of **counterconditioning** with **desensitization**.

With **classical counterconditioning** we train the pet to associate the handling with things she likes such as food, treats, petting, or play so that she's in a positive emotional state rather than feeling fearful or angry. We generally combine counterconditioning with **desensitization**, meaning that we start by introducing the handling or aversive stimulus at a level that the pet barely notices and gradually increase the level. The goal throughout the process is that the pet always acts as though she doesn't even notice the handling or stimulus that she previously disliked.

With **operant counterconditioning**, we train the pet to perform a behavior that's incompatible with the undesirable behavior. Ideally the pet earns a reward so that she's simultaneously learning a positive association with the situation. For instance, we may reward a pet for remaining stationary and calm while you perform a given procedure.

The same method described here can be used with cats.



Fig.A

**Fig.A:** If a dog responds to a muzzle by pulling her head away, she should be trained to associate the muzzle with good things before muzzling becomes essential.

## Part 1: First train the dog to associate the muzzle with good things.

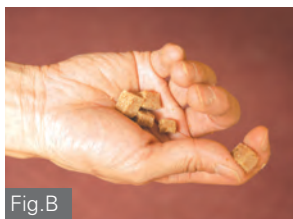


Fig.B

**Fig.B, Step 1a:** Start by holding multiple treats in one hand. By holding treats in this manner, they can be delivered consecutively while the dog's nose is through the muzzle.



Fig.C

**Fig.C, Step 1b:** Place your hand through the muzzle and away from the dog. The dog should be paying attention to you because you've already given treats and she knows you have more. For small dogs and cats you can place wet food treats such as canned petfood, peanut butter, babyfood, or tuna on a spoon and insert it through the muzzle.



Fig.D

**Fig.D, Step 1c:** Put your hand forward and let the dog reach out her head to your hand. You should not push your hand and treat into her mouth, because dogs who dislike the muzzle may consider this a threat. It's essential that the dog reach forward to get the treat. Give her several treats continuously so that her nose is always on your hand.

\*To see video depicting this protocol go to [www.AskDrYin.com](http://www.AskDrYin.com).

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Fig. E

**Fig. E, Step 1d:** When she's finished with the treats, remove your hand and the muzzle before she has a chance to move her head away. You want it to be clear that you are taking the muzzle away from her rather than giving her the chance to move away from it. Disappearance of the muzzle equals disappearance of the treats. Repeat this step until she immediately reaches for and eats the treats 5-10 times in a row. Then repeat with a higher stimulus level; in other words, with the muzzle placed farther down on your hand.



Fig. F

**Fig. F, Step 2a:** This time, place your hand so it protrudes halfway through the muzzle. Start by holding the muzzle out of reach. Note that if you can't fit your hand through the muzzle, just place the first two fingers through, use long treats such as jerky or pupperoni treats or use canned food on a spoon.



Fig. G

**Fig. G, Step 2b:** Present the muzzle and let her reach forward to grab the string of treats. She should be eating without hesitation. Note that here she's leaning forward as I bring the muzzle up to her. If the dog isn't leaning forward, pull the muzzle back to your body and repeat the process with your hand extended farther through the muzzle.



Fig. H

**Fig. H, Step 2c:** Now this dog readily takes the treat with my hand extended only slightly through the muzzle. Keep her eating for 3-10 seconds and then remove your hand and the muzzle and repeat the step. In general, stay at each step for 5-10 food trials (presentations of the string of treats). When she's successful 5-10 consecutive times, increase your expectations slightly. When moving to the next step, if the dog's response ever indicates that she does not want to immediately take treats, go back a step and repeat.

### Box 1: Potential problem.



Fig. I

**Fig. I, Incorrect:** Avoid pushing the muzzle forward if the dog doesn't immediately reach for the treats. And don't try to slip the muzzle on farther once the dog is eating the treats. Trying to progress too quickly can cause the dog to be scared and move away (i.e., the stimulus level is too high). This will set the process back a few steps, because now she will be less trusting of you. Always stay below the dog's stimulus threshold—the point at which she will react aversely.

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## Box 2: Tips for counterconditioning to muzzles

TIP



Fig.J



Fig.K

**Fig.J, Tip 1:** For training, you can use either the dog's meal or treats.

**Fig.K, Tip 2:** The dog should always reach forward to get the treat, as in this photo. She should look as if she doesn't even notice that a muzzle is present. Your goal should always be that the dog shows no adverse response—no withdrawal or hesitation to eat. She should act as though there is no scary stimulus present. If she hesitates, that means the stimulus level is too high and you need to back down to a previous step or somehow lower the stimulus level (e.g., by moving the muzzle farther back on your hand).



Fig.L

**Fig.L, Tip 3, Correct:** Where I hold the treat in relation to the muzzle determines where the dog's head is. Take care to hold the treat in the center so that she sticks her nose through the muzzle to get it.



Fig.M

**Fig.M, Tip 3, Incorrect:** In this case, the treat is too far from the center. The dog must reach around the outside of the muzzle to get it.



Fig.N

**Fig.N, Tip 4:** If the dog appears unmotivated or is not paying attention, try increasing the value of the food by feeding treats to another dog in front of the one you're training. Or, walk away so she knows she's losing the opportunity to get the food. Then try again.



Fig.O

**Fig.O, Tip 5:** Walk away or move to a different part of the room with each trial or each new step. If the dog is motivated by the treats, she should follow you.

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Fig.P

**Fig.P, Step 3a:** This time, place your hand so it barely protrudes through the muzzle. Start by holding the muzzle out of reach.



Fig.Q

**Fig.Q, Step 3b:** Again, she should immediately reach for and take the treats when you present the muzzle.



Fig.R

**Fig.R, Step 4a:** Next, place your hand only part-way through the muzzle so that the dog has to stick her nose through a portion of the muzzle to get the treat.



Fig.S

**Fig.S, Step 4b:** Remember to give treats continuously so that she does not have a chance to move her head away. If there's a gap in treats, she's likely to move.



Fig.T

**Fig.T, Step 5a:** Next, place the treat at the far end of the muzzle so that she has to stick her nose all the way through it.



Fig.U

**Fig.U, Step 5b:** The dog should assertively push her head into the muzzle (even jam it in) to get the treat.

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**Fig.V:** At this stage, when I remove the treats and muzzle, this dog gets up to follow my hand and try to grab more treats. This is a good sign; however, I still want the process to be under my control, so I'll move both the treats and muzzle far enough away that she understands she can't get them. When she's waiting patiently again, I will re-present the muzzle.



**Fig.W**



**Fig.X**

**Fig.W, Step 6a:** Now I can hold the treats far outside the muzzle and know that the dog will stick her nose in to get them.

**Fig.X, Step 6b:** She understands that putting her nose into the muzzle predicts that she will get treats. I'm still showing her the treat first, but later I'll just show her the muzzle and then give her the treat afterwards. In this way, we move from classical conditioning (association of the treat with the muzzle) to operant conditioning (rewarding a desired behavior with the treat).



**Fig.Y**



**Fig.Z**

**Fig.Y, Step 7a:** At this point I can slide my hands down the straps and snap the muzzle on.

**Fig.Z, Step 7b:** Simultaneously grasp the collar with one hand so that the dog has no opportunity to back out.



**Fig.AA**

**Fig.AA, Step 7c:** Be sure there's only room for one finger under the muzzle strap.



**Fig.BB**

**Fig.BB, Step 7d:** Once the muzzle is on, continue giving the dog treats to distract her.

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**Part 2: Rewarding dogs after they put their head into the muzzle (operant counterconditioning). Dogs who have shown a strong aversion to the muzzle should go through this stage before the muzzle is placed.**



**Fig.CC, Step 1:** Now this dog likes the muzzle and I can make this process into a game. Here, I run backward with the muzzle and she chases after it to insert her nose into it.



**Fig.DD, Step 2:** Once her nose is inserted, I reward her with a treat. Repeat this procedure to reinforce the behavior and to strengthen the positive association with the muzzle.

**Box 3: Placing the muzzle while simultaneously giving treats.**

In some cases it's safer to place the muzzle while simultaneously giving treats. It's best to do this in a way that prevents the dog from backing out of the muzzle.



**Fig.EE, Step 1:** First be sure that the dog's nose is all the way through the muzzle.



**Fig.FF, Step 2:** Then guide one hand up the strap.



**Fig.GG, Step 3:** Guide it far enough back so you can grasp the dog's harness or collar. Once you have done so, the dog cannot back out of the muzzle.



**Fig.HH, Step 4:** Then use both hands to snap the muzzle on.

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