

Tips and Tricks for the Deaf Dog Owner

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Just as every dog is different so is every deaf dog. Some dogs are born deaf, some have suffered injury, trauma or disease, and others become deaf as they age. A dog may be unilaterally or bilaterally deaf, suffer partial or complete hearing loss. Some “deaf” dogs may actually “hear” certain sounds, or be more sensitive to sound vibration and environmental stimulation. Not everything will work for every dog. Adopting a deaf dog, like any other dog, is a unique situation as often there is no solid history that comes with your dog.

Many myths surround deaf dogs and cause unnecessary prejudice. One of the primary misconceptions is that *deaf dogs are more aggressive*. Aggression can occur in any dog, although it is easy to blame a behavior on something we can more easily identify, such as a hearing impairment. *Deaf dogs come with “baggage”*. Dogs are what they are and become what they do in response to our relationship. Dogs live in the moment with reactions based on experience. They have resiliency potential. Commitment, dedication and working with your dog can help acquire appropriate reactions to a variety of experiences. *Deaf dogs are not the equivalent of “dumb” dogs*. Training a deaf dog requires the use of hand signals. Remember that Lassie, Rin-Tin-Tin and many other famous dogs were trained with hand signals, they simply did not memorize scripts. Dogs are not born with a command of the English language, you will be learning to communicate in a language you are both able to understand, and it should be undertaken as a joint venture which will add substance to your relationship. Studies have been conducted formally and informally which demonstrate many dogs, hearing and deaf, respond better to hand signals. In the canine world body language is the focus of communication.

When considering a deaf dog keep in mind they are not for the lazy. It is not feasible to sit in another room and tell the dog to leave something alone. While establishing rules and boundaries you will need to communicate with your dog which requires you to be there, in the moment and in the space, your dog is occupying. Yes, your dog will learn your boundaries and rules of household living with consistency. If you do not want your dog on the couch, it is important your dog is not on the couch when it's cute either. A deaf dog, like any other dog, requires consistent rules. Let your dog know when you leave the room if he is sleeping. We chose a spot just above his shoulder blade to touch when he is sleeping and we are moving to another room. He now knows why we touch him there, and can choose to follow or continue sleeping. There are varying schools of thought on touching, stimulation and deaf dogs. I have seen some information stating you should touch your dog frequently and in different places while sleeping to decrease the startle response. I think it depends on your dog. Is it a young puppy? Will your dog frequently be around small children? (If so, this is probably more important) Is it an older dog that most likely would not appreciate being poked at even if it could hear? Does your dog appear fearful or anxious when touched in certain areas? (If so that may be another issue to address) My choice was to allow my dog time to adjust to environmental stimulus and reassurance in new situations. I don't like to be poked or startled while I am sleeping and feel safe assuming he does not either. My grandchildren

are aware that his ears are “broken” and he can’t hear, and they actually have fun signing with our dog.

Most importantly, leash your dog in any area that is not confined. You do not have the advantage of calling your dog’s name. If he sees the squirrel and runs he is NOT looking at you. I do take my dog to the dog park and let him run and play ball. I often get compliments on how attentive he is and how close he stays, but he has learned to trust me and knows he needs to watch me. He also knows what tree we will be near when I throw his first ball of the game. Use caution here. The body language of a deaf dog can be challenging. Remember he can not hear other dogs coming up behind him and because he can not hear, his eye contact may appear bolder than other dogs appreciate. If you see another dog that looks challenged by this, move your dog away. Get his attention and get him going an opposite direction. Be sure you are comfortable with the dogs and people present. I usually go with a friend or family member and another dog, I have also learned what time of the day works best. Remember the quickest way to get your dog to come to you is often to turn your back and step away. When he is in a challenging situation socially if you walk toward him, he may turn away. He needs the visual and will most likely come to get it. Expose your dog to a variety of situations, take him to the pet store, obedience class, long walks, etc. Watch your dog closely with small children as they can have body language that is extremely confusing for a deaf dog, especially with their hands. It doesn’t mean your dog will bite, but he may become confused or anxious as their actions are more full body and livelier. People who dig in their pockets put the communication tool out of sight. Think of how you would feel if someone were in front of you talking and they had no mouth on their face....

Because your hands are your key communication tool it is important to consider discipline. Blocking behavior with your body to gently nudge your companion away, or your forearm, is a much better idea than using your hands. You will find your dog watching your hands for signals, which is difficult if you are reaching over the head for the collar. During our dogs first week with us he watched everything we did and would follow us through out the house, going from person to person, pushing open doors and gates. I bought him a t-shirt that said “STALKER” and I think he was proud to wear it. Your dog may be unsure of who he is supposed to be paying attention to right now. Give him time, he will figure it out.

Basic Training: (your instincts, as a human being, may cause you to verbalize your commands, and that is fine. Whether or not your dog can hear, they are fun to talk to and your dog will not think you are crazy) I encourage treats. Dogs learn by aversion or positive reinforcement. Training should be fun and treats will help your dog want to participate. Your dog is driven by something, you may need to try different types of treats. Soft small treats work best as they allow your dog to eat them and continue rapidly. Cut up hotdog or cooked chicken are great motivators. Don’t be afraid to pet your dog while training and smile. He is reading your body language! He can’t hear you say “good dog”, so you need to show “good dog”(thumbs up!). Try to train in short intervals, 20 minutes depending on your dogs attention span, and repeat twice a day. You can use any sign you want for a given behavior, just be sure you use the same sign consistently and the signs are varied enough to avoid miscommunication. Give your dog a sign name, anything your want. Use ASL for initials of people and things. Some dogs

who are partially deaf may respond to a dog whistle, or a clicker, both can be useful training aids. All clickers emit a different sound, so take him to the store and click to see if you get any response. Training your dog will be similar to training a hearing dog, good obedience trainers are fine with a hearing impairment, and a class will also help with appropriate socialization. Here are some starters I used:

Sit – hand flat, palm up. When teaching this I held a treat between my thumb and index finger, holding my other 3 fingers out, and moved slowly from the front of the face just over the head, back. The instinct to follow the treat may cause the back end to hit the floor. Treat instantly. If your dog backs up instead of sitting, use your other hand to gently press down on the rear of the dog while moving the treat just over the head.

Down – hand flat, palm down. Again, I placed the treat between my thumb and index finger, and moved my hand from the front of the noise to angle with the floor. At first you may have to touch the floor, the nose should follow the treat and you can gently use your other hand to press down on the back end. It may be easier to start from “Sit”, eventually the “Down” will happen on it’s own.

Stay - I face my palm to the dog, fingers spread open and hold it firm. You will want to take small steps away, maybe only one or two at first, treat when your dog does not follow by reaching to your dog with the treat (try not to step back toward the dog, eventually you can use the step back to go from down to sit). When you are first treating stay, repeat the open hand again after your dog has taken the treat and back your hand away.

Come – With a treat between your thumb and index finger, wave with the back of your hand toward your torso, treat immediately. If your dog hesitates to come, turn slightly sideways, squat down, you can even turn away, but repeat the command as he heads toward you and treat when he arrives.

Bring it – Point to the object you want and point in front of you. Treat a little when he pays attention to the object, treat a jack pot when he brings it! Don’t play tug of war (he’s not hearing you say drop it). Point down and wait for him to release. You can bribe with a treat, hold your hands out palm up under the object, ignoring him and praising when he releases, etc. Patience will find what works for you.

Shake – Hold your treat with your thumb, hand palm up, gently tap the back of your dog’s leg and guide it up. You can slowly remove the guide, and eventually the tap. Hold his paw and treat.

Crawl – Start from down, use the end of your down sign, back of hand toward your dog, and gently wave your hand front to back at ground level right in front of your dogs while slowly moving back. As he follows without getting up, treat every step, eventually space treats to more steps as he crawls. If he tries to get up to follow, go back to your down, repeat the crawl sign while keeping your other hand ready at the middle of his back to gently press down if he tries to stand. You should be off to the side in front of and facing your dog, moving backwards.

Play dead – Begin with your dog in a down, point your index and middle finger at your dog, hold the treat with your thumb and third finger. As you point your two fingers at your dog take your hand from the front of his mouth to the lower part of the shoulder blade toward the floor, then up toward the back. Your dogs head should follow and if he does not end up on his side you can gently roll him there. Point the 2 fingers again when

he is on his side and treat. Gradually increase the distance between your hand and your dog, and work on it from standing or sitting.

Roll Over – Follow play dead but keep going over the back. I use 2 fingers pointing at my dog and draw a small imaginary circle in the air for the sign.

Spin – Use your index finger extended, with a treat between your middle finger and thumb. Be sure your dog is following your hand and draw a circle, pointing to the floor, either clockwise or counter clockwise. At first you need to be close enough for your dog to follow your treat hand in the circle, increase distance gradually.

Targeting – get a scrap piece of carpet and teach your dog to go to it when you put it down. Do this by using it for sits and downs with extra treats. When someone knocks, your dog will not hear it. He sees you go to the door and follows. If you work on targeting you can point to your scrap carpet by the door to eventually not have any issues with letting someone in, signing for a package, etc. The ability to point and have your dog understand you want him to go there is an invaluable tool with a deaf dog.

Keeping your dog from darting out the door, whether with targeting or sit – stay is priceless! ALWAYS REMEMBER – with his back to you there is no communication!

Ending Play Time - When we play ball we count down because he can not hear me say “Are you done?”. I hold 3 fingers up as my dog runs back with the ball, meaning I will throw it 3 more times, then 2, then one. He now runs to the door with the ball after he sees “1”. The “3” indicates the game is winding down, and it doesn’t suddenly just stop.

You have your dog trained and he sits on command, for you. It is important you have others work with your dog as he becomes familiar with commands. If you find he is not sitting for others, watch how they are trying to make him sit. Are they pointing? Is their hand angled differently? Are they standing off to the side? Maybe they are standing to close? This would be the equivalent of going to work and finding out your new boss speaks only a foreign language! All family members should be using the same signals so your companion’s life is not a frustrating communication game.

As a last thought, I have heard mixed opinions on training collars and can offer my experience, stating I would never harm an animal in any way. My deaf dog is a blue heeler, I also have other animals including cats that do not want to be herded – ever. We tried to make a vibrating collar, and after 2 remote control car engines and a remote control plane we gave up. We tried to buy a vibrating collar, and found many websites offering them, but could not find them locally. Sams Club offers an attachment that vibrates, however the reviews were not so good. I finally bought a puppy trainer for a small dog. It emits a tone (which he can’t hear) and a static shock (I made my husband try it on first). We agreed it is never used for discipline, only for attention. We have since found a vibrating collar in a hunting supply store. The vibration has become a game. It means come and find me, and he will search the house when he feels the vibration. The collar also has a nick feature which we rarely use, but when we do it is to get his attention when I need it RIGHT NOW! And it is for the same things (consistency) that are not

allowed at any time – herding the cats, wearing the garbage can lid, etc. He learned not to herd the cats, with the collar set at 2 of 10, within a week or so. It was a decision I struggled with prior to giving in, but my cats are much more at peace and dinner is quiet. The shock is similar to touching a door knob, just enough to make you look around. We also put it on him at the park, because other dogs tend back off a beeping dog if needed and he is none the wiser...Deaf dogs are not mute dogs. They can and will bark. If you go to the door and bark we will let you out. When I am eating and you are barking sitting next to me, that is no apparent reason – your food dish is in the kitchen. We have found the best results come from ignoring this behavior because any attention it brings is attention. We need to live together and some rules need to go without explanation.

Recommendations:

www.deafdogs.org

<http://pets.groups.yahoo.com/group/deafdogs/>

<http://www.dfordog.com/deafdogs.htm>

<http://www.d2care.org/>

Living With a Deaf Dog, Susan Cope-Becker (I could only find it on Amazon)

The Other End of the Leash, Patricia McConnell

The Everything Dog Training and Tricks Book, Gerilyn Bielakiewicz

Culture Clash, Jean Donaldson

Dog Training for Dummies, Jack and Wendy Volhard

Pet Video Library – DVD's on training and tricks

ASL dictionary or check your community for an ASL class