

Living with a Deaf Dog

Deaf dogs make wonderful companions if you are willing to make a special effort to live with them successfully. Most notably they need to be carefully supervised and managed on leash at all times or within a confined area. More challenging for humans who are so used to talking is the need to develop a mode of communication without sound, using hand and body signals.

The deaf dog is not handicapped - he or she simply can't hear. Typically, deaf dogs compensate for the lack of hearing sound by developing a stronger reliance on visual signals and on their sense of smell. Because dogs don't speak or use language to communicate as we do, they are ahead of us in their ability to read body language and detect meaningful patterns of motion. Research has shown that even dogs with normal hearing learn signals easier and faster than they do words. So the challenge really is for us to learn to use signals effectively and consistently to build an effective relationship with our deaf dog.

Occasionally you will detect your dog's response to a trucks rumble, a dogs bark or someone entering the room, which will cause you to question how deaf they really are. In fact, their more highly developed sense of smell and sensitivity to vibration and air movement become significant cues for them to relate to their environment. You will notice your deaf dog develop more of these sensitivities as it matures.

Typical issues to think about as a deaf dog guardian:

- **Touch Sensitivity -**
- Deaf dogs often are touch sensitive. This is likely the result of people grabbing at her or him to get attention or from not hearing an approaching person or animal.
Make sure you Reinforce the dog with something it would love to eat at the moment it you touch him/her or that it has startled. This way you will pair something "good" happening and soon the dog find that the dog reacts less to what ever scared him or her.
- **Startles easily -**
- The dog may startle easily if she or he does not see the person or dog approach. *Try and position your self so the dog can see you try stomping your feet. Or if its dark out shine a flash light or turn the lights on and of quickly. Again pair with a yummy treat of some sort right away.*
- **Touch and startle response -**
- Touch sensitivity and startle response merge when the dog is sleeping. Awakenning a deaf dog from sleep can cause a touch sensitive startle resulting in a snap or even a bite unless carefully desensitized.
Again its very important that you Pair something really yummy with your touch. This way the dog will look forward to you touching him/her! This must continue for the life of the dog!

- **Separation Anxiety -**

Deaf dogs may have separation issues because they cannot hear. For example, if you leave a dog in a crate she or he may panic about being alone because it cannot hear activity in the next room. *Leave the dog with an activity to do while your gone like to eat a stuffed Kong or a buster cube. Leave the TV on and a light of some sort.*

- **Recall -**

If your deaf dog runs away from you, how will you get her or him to return to you?

All dogs are selectively deaf if not trained to reliably 'come' when called. For all dogs, their ability to stop and return to you and to avoid trouble may occasionally be a matter of life or death. This issue is intensified by the deaf dog's inability to hear danger as it approaches. It is vital that you resolve to have your deaf dog on a leash at all times when not in a confined area. This discipline will result in a dog with a very reliable recall if accidentally freed.

Building a relationship -

We build relationships between canines and humans by learning each other's respective signals. Human signals are most often verbal: we use words, sounds, intonation, and volume. Our faces and our bodies have corresponding movements that enhance the meaning of the words such as smiles, frowns, stiffening, slumping, flailing hands or arms, or even the speed or lack of it in our walk. We also support our relationships with touch. If we are not touching, nearness or distance of our bodies communicates trust or a lack of it.

Your dog is never going to hear your velvet intonations. But you will have all of those same nonverbal tools to use in building a relationship with your deaf dog. You'll just have to come up with a system of hand signals instead of words to use to ask your dog to do things with and for you. And above all, you need to make certain your dog sees what you signal and trusts you enough to allow your touch. In time hand signals and touch will be the bridge to your bond.

- **Do no Harm -**

Because your hands and your touch will be so important for communication and to your bond, it is vital that you make the choice not to coerce or physically correct your deaf dog. As pain and correction have been the standards for dog training for years, you may be challenged here to learn something new - positive reinforcement training. You will need to develop the skills of letting your dog understand in clear terms what you expect and how good she or he is when meeting your expectations. Physical correction risks creating confusion, fear and distrust in your deaf dog. It is left with no option but to fight back, to snap or even bite.

Punishment for the deaf dog should be no more severe than a wag of the finger (no!) a shrug (too bad), no treat or a time out.

- **A Common Language -**

As dogs don't speak English you don't need to learn American Sign Language which teaches you to spell words to be successful with your deaf dog. You really only need simple signs that are symbols of what you want. As you will usually have a leash and hopefully treats, one handed signs are most feasible. Keep it simple and keep it instinctive so you can remember this alternative language. Also, when your dog encounters someone who has not been instructed in your secret language, they may be able to guess what your dog's behavioral signs might be. All dogs strive to communicate with humans. Deaf dogs are really desperate for some connection. As you both learn together, you'll see your dog brighten, be enthusiastic, attentive and show an aptitude to learn that is equal or greater to a hearing dogs because of it's ability to stay focused on you. Be patient as you are both learning something new.

Having now wored with several deaf dogs, there is nothing more memorable than the moment the dog learns a sign so it has a recognizable mode of communication. Imagine landing on Mars and not only not speaking Martian, but everything around you is silent. Your body and the Martians body look different and work differently. Suddenly something that looks like eyes meet yours and a tenacle moves. When it moves again, something tasty is put in your mouth. After the tenth repetition of tenacle movement and treat you can at least assume the Martian is a friend and is likely making an attempt to communicate that to you. It is likely that you will now try to make sense of the signal and that you will tolerate a tenacle touching you.

We error in thinking that canines naturally understand humans and that they naturally want us to touch and care for them. They are dependent on us. It is always important that we earn and sustain their trust by being clear and caring.

- **Some simple signs for a deaf dog:**

GOOD DOG

- thumbs up

SIT

- (AKC obedience) with palm forward at your side, raise your arm straight out and bend your elbow at the waist and raise your hand, palm toward your shoulder

Or

- palm forward at shoulder height, lower you palm to your side.

DOWN

- (AKC obedience) with palm forward at your side, raise your arm straight out and up over your head
- with your index finger, point to the floor

STAY

- raise your palm forward to waist height

WAIT

- hold thumb and index finger and inch apart with other fingers closed

GO

- spin one index finger

COME

- sweep arm out and back, palm toward your body, about waist high

WALK

- index and third finger, pointed downward. Move fingers as though 'walking'

BALL

- Lightly start to make a fist closing your fingers together onto the top of your thumb in a clutching action

NO

- wag your index finger

(I have found this signal becomes powerless over time due to overuse of similar movements)

- 'chop' your right hand onto your left palm near your dogs face

"Leave It"

- Close your fingers into your thumb and on top of your Thumb and then Quickly Release them in a fan motion them at the dog.

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Create a sign for a behavior by chaining signals. For example, for a retrieve:

Sit, down, wait, ball, go

