

Training and Enriching Blind and Deaf Dogs

We can help dogs that are deaf or blind to lead fulfilling lives of learning and enjoyment by playing to their other strengths: the senses that aren't impaired.

Working with a blind dog

When working with a blind dog, we focus on verbal cues, scent and touch.

Teach a shoulder tap: Remember that a blind dog can be easily startled, so make sure to always talk to them first before touching them. It's helpful to teach them that a shoulder tap means "turn toward me." Gently tap the dog on the shoulder and follow with a tasty treat. Repeat this often and in different places, and soon the dog learns to equate the tap with something pleasurable and will turn toward you in anticipation.



Using verbal cues: In terms of training, much of it is very similar to what you'd do with a sighted dog. However, you rely more heavily on verbal cues and you give them *as the dog is learning the behaviour* instead of adding them once they've learned it.

A blind dog will need some new words to help them negotiate what they cannot see. For example, when there is a step that they need to go up or down, you can cue them just before they reach it, saying "Step up" or "Step down". Inch them closer, right to the base or top of the step, so they can sense the obstacle or the void and repeat the cue as you do so. If they are hesitant, hold a treat under their nose to lure them to make a move up or down. Remember to mark and treat every time they successfully complete a behaviour, such as step up or step down.

Other useful directional cues include "Go right" or "Go left" as you make turns with a blind dog; initially you may want to steer them with the side of your leash or your leg as you're cuing, but they'll soon make the connection on their own. "Careful" can be used to let them know that something is in front of them and they need to stop. As you walk towards an obstacle, say "careful" and prevent them from moving forward by putting gentle pressure on the leash or a hand on their chest.

Luring to learn: Luring can be used to teach a number of behaviours, including foundation skills such as "Sit" and "Down." Just as you would with a sighted dog, hold a high-value treat under their nose and lure them into the position as you say the cue, then mark and reward.

Walking tips: It's very helpful to map out a walking route for your blind dog so they become accustomed to the lay of the land, including doors, stairs, slopes, and a variety of textures underfoot (concrete, gravel, grass). Be sensitive to the fact that a blind dog has a heightened awareness of ambient noise and may be confused and overwhelmed by sounds that you find



normal; you may need to expose them incrementally to the auditory environment. Keep a shorter lead on the dog so you can more effectively control their movements and prevent run-ins with poles, hydrants, and walls and so on.

Also, consider wearing something that jingles as a distinctive but gentle aural cue for your blind dog to help them locate and stay connected to you. For example, you could attach a set of keys to your belt or wear a snap-on dog collar with a jingle bell around your ankle.

There are tools to help the blind dog negotiate their environment, such as a halo. These usually attach to a harness and sit above the dog's head or around the chest like a circular bumper. If a dog is getting close to a wall, for example, the halo will touch before the dog bumps into it, giving them time to stop or adjust their route. Echolocation collars give a warning beep if the dog is nearing a solid surface.

Enrichment ideas: Enrichment is vital for a blind dog's mental and physical health. They may feel less inclined to move around so we want to encourage them to be active and engage with their world.

- Utilize their sense of hearing with toys that squeak, crackle or emit other sounds.
- Utilize their sense of smell with already scented tennis balls or rubber chews or you can add your own homemade odour by rubbing a bit of peanut butter or Cheese Whiz on the surface of the toy. If you want to engage them in a game of chase, throw the toy down hard on the ground and close to the dog so they can hear it first, then follow the scent.
- Encourage them to play find-it games: hide smelly treats, such as greasy hot dog bits, in and under objects in a small radius. Guide the dog to the first few hiding places to get them into the game; use lots of verbal encouragement when they start to sniff them out on their own.
- Involve them in scent detection: Using an essential oil such as peppermint, condition your dog to the odour by having them sniff a Q-tip soaked with a few drops of oil while you feed them a stream of treats. Then set up a few rows of overturned boxes and place the scented Q-tip, encased in a small container, under one of them. Take your blind dog by their leash and let them investigate around the boxes until they signal to you that they've found the box with the scent. Give them praise and a jackpot of treats when they locate it.
- Puzzle games are fun and mentally stimulating; loads of these are commercially available, but an easy homemade version is a muffin tin with tennis balls placed in each cup and treats concealed underneath. Your blind dog will become adept at lifting out the balls to uncover the goodies.

Working with a deaf dog

With dogs that are deaf, we shift our emphasis to visual cues, as well as scent and touch.

Teach a shoulder tap: Similar to blind dogs, deaf dogs may startle if we approach and touch them when they're sleeping or not looking at us. To give them a heads up, you can stomp on the floor to create a vibration that may catch a deaf dog's attention or wake them up. It's helpful to teach them that a shoulder tap means "look at me." Start by tapping the dog on their shoulder when they are already looking at you and give them a treat. Then tap them on the shoulder and treat when they are at your side. Move in increments of touching and treating until you are behind them and able to tap their shoulder without startling them. As you repeat this often and in different places, the dog quickly learns to equate the tap with something pleasurable and will turn to you in anticipation.



Use visual signals:

- We rely mostly on visual signals to communicate with deaf dogs. You can use traditional obedience training hand signals or make up your own; some people learn American Sign Language (ASL). It's up to you; your deaf dog won't care as long as your cues are clear and consistent, with a different signal assigned to every action or behaviour you are wanting. Most important, be careful and deliberate with your hand and body movements and remember that facial expressions also play a role in communicating with a deaf dog so be conscious of what you are projecting.



Instead of a clicker, which the dog can't hear, you can use a visual marker to indicate when they have done something correctly, then follow with a treat. Common markers for deaf dog training are a "thumbs up" cue or a "hand flash," where your hand starts in a fist, then opens with fingers spreading out. If it's dark outside or dim inside, you can use the flick of a penlight or keychain light as a marker. Just be careful not to shine the light in the dog's eyes.

Train a "watch me": The most logical first cue to teach a deaf dog is "watch me" — teaching them to give you their attention. Hold a treat under the dog's nose, then raise your hand to your face and point your index finger at your eyes. When the dog's gaze follows the treat to your eyes, give them a thumbs up or hand flash marker and then the treat.

When your deaf dog is not looking at you, how do you get them to check in? It is not recommended to have a deaf dog off leash unless they are in a safely enclosed area for the simple reason that if they wander, they cannot hear you call. However, even in places like fenced dog parks, a deaf dog might be a

distance away. Instead of going to the dog to get their attention, some people use a vibrating collar, which issues a vibration that tells the dog, once they are conditioned to it, to look at you. (FYI, these are *not* the same as shock collars, which we do not advocate.) Some, but not all, deaf dogs respond successfully to vibration collars.

Other basic signals:

- Sit: hand palm up moving in an upward motion
- Down: finger pointed up at chest, then swiping downward
- Stay: open hand palm forward
- Come: hand open at side and raised diagonally to opposite shoulder.

Enrichment ideas: Since deaf dogs have their sight, enrichment requires a little less orchestration than it does with blind dogs. Just remember that any games involving visual cues need you to be positioned where the dog can clearly see your signals. Sniffing activities such the ones mentioned above for blind dogs are equally fun and stimulating for deaf dogs.



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