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Sign Language

BY SARA JACKSON

You might think training deaf dogs is difficult, since they can't hear commands or clickers. But canines are experts at reading body language, so hand signals are just as effective as verbal cues.

Each year, many dogs are surrendered to shelters because they're deaf. Unfortunately, few will find forever homes. But people who train and live with hearing-impaired dogs will tell you that deafness should not be regarded as a handicap.

Deaf dogs can learn as well as those that hear. You just have to use visual rather than verbal or sound cues. In fact, because dogs are so good at reading body language, training can actually be easier this way. The trick is having a clear signal for each command, and to keep that signal consistent.

"Watch me"

There are hand signals for commands like sit, stay, down and come, but you'll also need sign language for phrases like watch me and good dog! The hardest part of training a deaf dog is getting him to focus on you without being distracted by his surroundings, so the first piece of sign language you'll need to teach him is watch me.

The trick is having a clear signal for each command, and to keep that signal consistent.

Every time my dog Nitro would look at me, I would give him a flash of my open hand to mark his good behavior, then give him a treat, says Christina Lee, founder of Deaf Dogs Rock (deafdogsrock.com). An open flash of the hand replaces the click, in clicker training to mark the good behavior the second it takes place, followed by a high value food treat.



Christina Lee's husband Chris using hand signals to train Nitro.

Photos courtesy of Christina Lee, Deaf Dogs Rock



Nitro watching for the next cue.

Once your deaf dog has learned to watch you, it's time to start teaching him sign language for basic commands. To make things easier, begin your dog's training in a place devoid of too many distractions like inside the house or in a fenced yard. It is recommended that training sessions be kept short like between five and ten minutes at least three times a day.

Christina suggests teaching deaf dogs the signals used in American Sign Language.

Though there are other ways of going about it, Christina suggests teaching deaf dogs the signals used in American Sign Language (ASL). Here some training tips for basic commands using ASL hand signals.



"Sit"

Begin by holding a healthy treat at the tip of your dog's nose, then draw the offering back behind his head until he sits. When using the ASL sign for sit, place the treat between your thumb and palm while making the sign.

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Chris commands Nitro to "stay".

"Stay"

When teaching your dog to stay, Christina suggests using the ASL hand signal then taking a step back. If he stays, he gets a hand flash to mark his good behavior. Repeat, taking an additional step back each time.

"Down"

Teaching a deaf dog to lie down is very simple and can be done

in either one of two ways. The first is to motion toward the floor with the flat of your hand, palm facing down. The other is to get him to focus on your finger as you draw it towards you on the ground. Pretty soon, he will slide towards you into the down position.

"Come"

You can use the ASL signal, which is to keep your elbow bent, and with your arm in front of you, bring it to your chest. With a deaf dog, start off with a long line attached to him at all times, says Christina. The main thing with the recall or come command is keeping your dog's attention from a distance when there are distractions. Even if you have a backyard, you want to have control of the dog so he doesn't walk off. Once you get his attention, take a couple of steps back, ask for the come, and when he takes even one step towards you, flash your hand to mark the correct

behavior. Then reward the step with a treat. From that point, just increase the distance with each training session.

"Good dog!"

During training sessions, it's important to let your dog know he has done a good job, not just by giving him treats but also by signing good dog! This is usually indicated with a thumbs up, followed by lots of petting and tummy rubs. The use of treats should only be temporary, so it is vital that your deaf dog be shown praise by the use of body language and hand signals.

You might be wondering how a deaf dog will know when he has done something incorrectly. Christina stresses that you should never ever strike or slap a deaf dog (or any dog) because he views your hands as a means of communication. It's very important to retain his trust so he feels safe and secure. I will sometimes give the ASL sign for no, then redirect the behavior followed by a thumbs up, says Christina. If the dog goes right back to the bad behavior after being redirected, I will put my hands on my hips and make an angry face.

With lots of love and patience, your deaf companion will soon become as well trained as any other dog. 

