

BREAKING THE SOUND BARRIER: Living with and Training the Deaf Dog

By: Elisabeth Catalano, MA, CPDT, CDBC

When I tell people that the sweet little white dog they have been playing with is deaf, I get the same response, a sad, troubled look and an "Oh, that's too bad". I always reply with a big grin, "It's ok, he doesn't know it"! And, he DOESN'T. Never having heard anything, as far as I know, he doesn't know what he's missing. His world is perfectly normal to him. Announcement of his deafness is often followed by astonishment, usually because he is so friendly and well behaved. "Is it hard to train him?" My answer is always an unqualified, "No!"

With some limitations, it is very possible to train a deaf dog. Trainers often fail to see the potential in these dogs - not to mention the benefit of their own skill development. The deaf dog can increase awareness of our own non-verbal communication. Trainers, and more importantly humans, rely heavily on sound, but the deaf dog can force you to be more creative. Communication for dogs has always been far beyond sound; the deaf dog causes us to embrace that fact. There are some advantages in working with deaf dogs, too: no fear of loud noises, no getting distracted by barking and no hearing the rustling of the food pouch!

Deaf dogs can and should be encouraged to attend regular obedience classes, which use positive training/lure reward methods, because the hand signals are largely the same. They can and do compete in the sports of obedience, rally and agility (with the exception of AKC events) and many are therapy dogs

Studies on the prevalence of deafness in dogs are limited, but it is estimated that thousands of dogs are born deaf each year. Eighty different breeds are affected by deafness and that number is increasing. Additionally, dogs can and do lose their hearing as a result of illness, infection, trauma or old age. Unfortunately, many deaf dogs are euthanized due to irrational myths and a lack of understanding. The Dalmatian Club of America has an official position calling for the euthanasia of deaf puppies.

Dogs that lose their hearing later on in their lives may have an adjustment period, but adapt well. All deaf dogs can lead normal, happy and full lives that differ little from their hearing counterparts. They only require a little patience and a creative trainer, willing to think outside the box.

The two most pervasive myths regarding deaf dogs are that they are brain damaged or are more prone to aggression. In the case of deaf Dalmatians, it was shown that the portion of the brain (the auditory cortex) that deals with auditory impulses was greatly reduced in size. George M. Strain, PhD, however, writes in the same article: "The brain responds to the loss of a sensory modality by various forms of plasticity, whereby CNS structures that would have received input from that sensory modality constrict and adjacent structures expand to take advantage of the available space." According to Dr. Strain, "The findings in the Dalmatian are undoubtedly a reflection of the same pathology". He further summarized that "... these animals do not have diminished mental capacities, any more than the average deaf or blind human has diminished mental capacity." ("Aetiology, prevalence and diagnosis of deafness in dogs and cats." *British Veterinary Journal* 152:17-36, 1996, Baillière Tindall)

There are simply no studies quantifying the prevalence of aggression in deaf dogs or demonstrating that aggression has a higher incidence than is generally observed in the canine population as a whole. There are however, numerous anecdotes to support both sides of the argument. As trainers, we acknowledge and accept the potential for "aggression" in the canine population as a whole. Therefore we can expect that deaf dogs will be no exception. It is unrealistic to expect that we would not encounter an aggressive deaf dog. However, claims that deaf dogs are more likely to be aggressive are unsupported.

The chief concern expressed by those who claim a higher incidence of aggression is that the deaf dog will startle easily and bite. Realistically, any startled dog can bite. While it may be easier to startle a deaf dog, good preventative training can minimize problems. Wake the deaf dog gently by blowing a gentle puff of air across his fur or lightly touching him. When he wakes, smile and call him to do something fun. Using high-value food will also make the transition to waking more pleasant, especially for dogs whose history is unknown. Traditional classical conditioning/desensitization

exercises for touch can take the edge off the startle effect and even make it a welcome event.

COUNSELING

While training a deaf dog can be challenging and rewarding, you should be prepared to do a little work up front before you offer your services or welcome them into an obedience or puppy class. You will be counseling owners that have unexpectedly found they are living with a deaf dog and have no idea what to do.

Owners that have just discovered that the cute little puppy that they are in love with is deaf are often disappointed and worried. They may feel overwhelmed by the prospect and the responsibility of training a deaf dog. Owners whose dogs have lost or are losing their hearing are sad and may worry about quality of life. You may be the deaf dog owners first, only or last resource. The information you give them will determine that particular dogs' outcome. It is important that you provide them with accurate, effective information and lots of hope.

I remember how I felt the first time I realized that I would never see my puppy "light up" when I called his name. It is something that I had always enjoyed, but had taken for granted with my other dogs. Knowing I would never have that made me sad. One day, not long after Nevar joined us, I found him playing with the other dogs. I waved my arms high over my head to catch his attention, and there it was! The bright look, the perked ears! No hearing, but pure joy just the same. That is how it is with the deaf dog, the same, but different.

THINGS TO CONSIDER

Owning a deaf dog is not to be taken lightly. There are serious training and safety considerations that make it a huge commitment of time, energy and patience. While some breeds come equipped with traits that make them easy to work with, other breeds possess traits that make them more independent and aloof. Deafness in these dogs can exacerbate training problems.

Many ordinary scenarios can pose a risk to the deaf dog. Enter my backyard on any given day when the dogs are out and I promise, they will know you are there long before you reach the gate. The deaf dog however, may be unaware of a visitor's arrival and be overlooked. Gates may be left open simply because no one knew the dog was even there. Signs advising visitors that "a deaf dog is in residence" and to "close all gates", are a must. Spring-closed gates, should also be used if possible.

Initially, the responsibility of keeping my puppy safe was overwhelming. If a leash came undone, or a car came too close, there was no way to call him out of harm's way. What if my attention was diverted? He could not hear approaching danger and react. Having a deaf dog means being diligently aware of what is going on around you and being prepared for possible dangers.

Supervision plays a key role in any early training, but it is particularly demanding with the deaf dog. You must be close to get his attention. Eh-eh won't work! You will have to go to him in order to redirect him to something else. After getting my pups attention, I used a wag of my finger, a traditional "no-no" sign when I stopped the behavior and then moved him on to something else.

The need for early socialization cannot be overemphasized, especially for the deaf puppy. Initial interactions with other dogs must be supervised because growls, yelps and other auditory warnings cannot be heard. Well-socialized and patient adult dogs can teach puppies to recognize the subtle visual cues (lip lift, hard stare, freezing) that occur prior to a correction. This experience will lay a good foundation for canine relationships later on.

TRAINING

Being an avid clicker trainer, I worried (needlessly as it turned out) about not being able to use my favorite training tool. Thankfully, markers come in all shapes and sizes. I chose a "thumbs up" sign as a marker. For more rapid training, when a hand signal was too slow or cumbersome, I used a small "squeeze" flashlight on a key chain. Some sources suggest the use of lasers

as markers. Due to the potential for retinal damage when looking directly at a laser, they are not recommended.

It is important to be thorough when establishing a secondary reinforcer or conditioned stimulus. Unlike the clicker, which is a distinct sound that is easily noticed, the dog needs to have a visual marker in his peripheral sight to detect it.

Teaching attention and rewarding check-ins is a pre-requisite for training. There are several ways to establish attention early on. A light tap-tap on the shoulder or flank should prompt the dog to turn; the behavior can then be marked and rewarded. A tap-tap is preferred over a single touch because it is more intentional and won't be confused with an unintentional passing bump. This attention exercise serves a dual purpose - touch is good! At a distance, floor stomping, arm waving or a shake of the leash will also work.

NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

Be creative but practical when using visual cues and hand signals. Signs that can be made with one hand are faster and require less effort. Slightly exaggerated signals should be used for clarity and so that they are obvious in the peripheral vision. Signals that use movement are easily distinguished. Of course, as training advances, the signals may be faded to a more refined system of communication. Because I planned to do agility, I taught Nevar hand targeting early in his training. I found it to be an indispensable way of communicating, whether it was moving him to a desired location or directing his attention to an approaching visitor.

Teaching bite inhibition to puppies can be a bit tricky since a yelp from another puppy or an "ouch!" from a human will do no good. I allowed Nevar to mouth me initially, but when the biting became uncomfortable I would abruptly withdraw all interaction and walk away. Consistency is the key for bite inhibition as well as all unwanted behavior! All the same training rules that apply to hearing dogs apply to the deaf dog as well.

REMOTE COMMUNICATION

For working with the deaf dog at a distance, the best, and probably most elusive, training tool is a vibrating collar (V-collar). The collar vibrates when the handler presses the button on a remote. Traditionally used as a warning for the shock collar, the vibration offers a unique paging system that lets your dog know you are trying to get his attention.

It can be difficult to find a collar that has a vibration strong enough to catch the attention of a distracted dog and cover a practical working range. There are a few electronic shock collars available that offer a vibrating feature and cover $\frac{1}{2}$ mile radius or more. Deactivating the shock to avoid accidents or mistakes is easy enough. Remove the contacts and expose the screws. The screws can then be covered with the rubber tips used for prong collars.

There are some limitations to the equipment though. Because of the size of the unit and the need to have it on tightly, it is not practical or comfortable to have it on for long periods. Smaller and lighter units, to accommodate smaller dogs, can be made using common items. Furry dogs may find it more difficult to detect the vibration and if more than one handler is present, the dog may become confused as to who is "paging" him.

Some resources suggest using the V-collar as a marker, but I selected it for attention at a distance. I purchased a strong unit that would reach a $\frac{1}{2}$ -mile radius. I began Nevar's training by creating a very strong conditioned emotional response (CER) to the vibration. I paired the stimulation with fresh liver and steak that I had cooked with garlic. After a few training sessions, Nevar's ear would flick every time I pressed the button. Shortly after, his eyes began to drift toward my food pouch whenever I paged him!

I immediately began "calling" him (via page), when he wasn't looking and then gradually added mild distractions. We rapidly progressed to outdoor work and then eventually to out-of-sight recalls. His happy expression and his quick response were proof that the training worked properly.

Rule of thumb for most experts is deaf dogs should never be allowed off-leash. I believe that depends on the individual dog and the quality of

training. There are many hearing dogs that never make it to off-leash status simply because they are unreliable. Again, deaf dogs are no different.

CONCLUSION

Recently I found the following quote, which has become one of my favorites: "For perhaps, if the truth were known, we are all a little blind, a little deaf, a little handicapped, a little lonely, a little less than perfect. And if we can learn to appreciate and utilize the dog's full potential, we will, together, make it in this life on earth." Author unknown.

Working with a deaf dog will stretch your skills as a trainer and test your flexibility and creativity. There is a unique bond to be enjoyed with these gentle creatures that wait to share their quiet world. Don't be afraid to move beyond the familiar, you will all be better because of it.

RESOURCES

Deaf Dog Education Action Fund (www.deafdogs.org)

Deaf Puppies, Deaf Dogs (www.critterchat.net/deafpuppies1.htm)

Deafness in Cats and Dogs (www.lsu.edu/deafness/deaf.htm)

REFERENCES

"Aetiology, prevalence and diagnosis of deafness in dogs and cats." *British Veterinary Journal* 152:17-36, 1996, Baillière Tindall

"Deafness prevalence and pigmentation and gender associations in dog breeds at risk", *The Veterinary Journal* 167 (2004) 23-32, George M. Strain

"Handbook of Applied Dog Behavior and Training, Volume I", Steven R. Lindsay

"Living with a Deaf Dog" by Susan Cope Becker