

Training basics and tips for deaf and visually impaired dogs

Please note that this is written on the basis that the dog and trainer have zero experience.

The single most important thing to remember when working with deaf and visually impaired dogs is that they are just dogs! A dog's strongest most important sense is their sense of smell as long as they have that you can teach them all the things you teach a hearing, visual dog. I will begin by giving the basics of touch training. The dogs pick this up quite quickly us humans take a little longer. It can feel a bit awkward at first but easy to get the hang of. Be patient with older dogs as losing their vision and hearing can be quite confusing.

Let's start with a marker. This is something to indicate to the dog that you are happy with them. It's the equivalent of 'good dog'. It's important to condition this marker as all your training will be based off it. The marker is always followed by a treat in the beginning. With touch training, the marker I personally use is as follows.

Using a flat hand, stroke the dog in a single stroke from between the ears to the tip of the nose. Immediately follow with a treat. Repeat this a number of times. The dog will begin to become expectant of a treat. It is important to continue to use this marker with the dog numerous times a day at random followed by a treat for a couple of weeks. This solidifies its meaning in any circumstance.

After a marker has been conditioned you can move onto basic obedience.

Sit: get the dogs attention. Bring a food reward to the dog's nose. Using your index and middle fingers of your other hand, tap the dog firmly, twice, just above the tail. As soon as you do this, move the treat slowly above the dogs head and back until the dog is in a sitting position. Use your marker the instant the dog's bottom touches the floor and then reward with a treat. Repeat but keep training session relatively short. When the dog begins getting into a sit at your touch command you can remove the lure.

Drop: have the dog in a sitting position. Again have a treat for him to smell. Bring the treat from his nose directly beneath his head but all the way to the floor. Using your index and middle fingertips firmly tap between the shoulder blades while moving the lure further away from the dog until he is in a 'drop' position. Give the dog a mark then a treat. I will note on this one that this can be difficult to teach older dogs if they have never been taught drop before as they oftentimes feel vulnerable in this position and it can hurt old arthritic joints. If it's too much for the dog don't push it.

Stay: again put the dog in a sit, mark and reward. Using the palm of your hand, place your hand firmly on the dog's chest. Mark and reward. Repeat this a few times increasing the time between touching the dogs chest and marking and rewarding the dog. Then place your hand on the dog's chest, take a step away, step back towards the dog, mark and reward.

Repeat a few times. Gradually increase the space between you and the dog. If the dog comes to you when you step away take him back and start again. This can be a tricky one for anxious dogs so take your time.

Come/follow me: have the dog sit. Mark and reward. Using your full index and middle fingers, stroke the dog from the top of the left thigh to about midway down the leg. With your other hand use a treat to lure the dog to follow you. Mark and reward. Repeat. Dogs usually pick this up very quickly.

These are just basics and just a guide to training. These are methods I use with my own deaf and visually impaired/blind dogs. The one touch command I have to alter depending on the dog is the stay command some dogs I use a hand on the chest but other dogs become excited by this so I use a flat palm against their nose.

Other tips to help deaf and visually impaired dogs in the home.

Dogs that are born deaf and visually impaired know no different and cope really well. Older dogs that lose those senses can sometimes struggle a bit to begin with. These dogs need to learn to map the home with scent alone, because of this please be wary when using things such as cleaning products, scented candles and room diffusers as they can overpower the dogs sense of smell and cause confusion.

Try to avoid moving furniture. If you must move furniture, place the dog on a lead and walk around the furniture to help the dog re map the area.

Dogs that were born deaf and visually impaired don't know any different and learn how to navigate the world very quickly. However dogs that have lost these senses can be a little anxious. Rescue Remedy is a natural way to help but it doesn't work with all dogs. A comfort toy with a heartbeat can help provide comfort or an item of clothing with your scent on it, for the dog to cuddle up on.

Animals that have lost senses can still react to storms and such as they react to the change in the atmosphere.

Lastly, don't feel sorry for your deaf and visually impaired dog. By attaching these feelings to these amazing animals, we tend to coddle them. This can create issues such as separation anxiety. They are just dogs, like any other, the only difference is how we communicate with them.

I hope this is of some use to you. Good luck with your foster baby.