

## Living with and Training Deaf Puppies / Dogs, Maureen Ross MA

The following tips are an accumulation of thoughts on living and loving a deaf dog. Our American Bulldog, Casidy, lived to be 13. She resiliently integrated with our Newfs, a Border Terrier and a Greyhound.

We adopted her not knowing she was deaf. Apparently, the breeder was inexperienced, and/or knew, and simply wanted to find homes for the dogs.

One of first books we purchased was Susan Cope-Becker's *Living with a Deaf Dog*. There are a few links and books listed at the end of this "brief" article. This is not extensive. My experience as a trainer and behavioral counselor, and because of Casidy, has led me to engage with many dogs and dog parents with challenges (blind, physically disabled, deaf).

Finding an empathetic trainer, who has lived with and trained a deaf dog, is helpful. Training dogs, whether hearing or not, is an enjoyable and enriching learning experience. With a deaf dog, it takes an open-mind and commitment to changing how we communicate. It's a good life lesson for accepting other's differences.

Dogs who are born with challenges do not know they have them. Being aware of this gives one a sensitivity, and wide-eyed respect, as we observe puppies, or older dogs, who lost their sight or hearing. They are resilient and adapt. Often, they rely on the other dogs in a multi-dog pack, if the other dogs are gentle and safe. Some dogs are not use to, or desensitized to, what may be peculiar dog behavior to them. Supervision and management, being proactive, and safety, are necessary for the dogs, children and you!

Here are some helpful tips, and a few resources, that have been helpful to us. You can visit my website at [www.dogtalk.com](http://www.dogtalk.com) and [www.newenglandpetpartners.org](http://www.newenglandpetpartners.org). There are many healthy, physically challenged dogs who become delightful therapy dog teams.

- Training a deaf dog requires an open-mind, willing to learn new ways of communicating, and patience. The rewards are many for those who engage with anyone with a disability, dog or human. Getting an American Sign Language Dictionary is handy. Basically, we did not know Casidy was deaf for almost a year. She was an expert at visuals, and used role-modeling, observing us and the other dogs. She was "super" alert, learning "watch-me" at 8-weeks. I took credit, thinking I was a "super great" teacher. Hah. It was all about learning for her. She didn't know she was deaf – she likely thought we were weird when we were babbling instructions, or calling her, then when she didn't come, we'd go to get her frowning. No aversive teaching from us – but we did wonder why, when not looking at us, she ignored us. We ended up at Tuft's to get a Baer Test for deaf dogs. Casidy was diagnosed as bilateral. She was totally deaf in one ear, but could hear a little in the other. We were taught how to use visual signals and vibrations, like stomping the floor near her, to get her attention. Long story short, I used clicker training, expressions, body language and visual aids.

- Beginning to build a relationship with a deaf dog requires the same as all puppies, socialization and manners, safety and management, supervision with children and other pets, a healthy diet, Veterinarian wellness checks, and daily living and learning. Safety means exercising on leash for walks or in a secured fenced yard. If you have multiple pets, as we do (cats, parrots, dogs) each should be introduced one-at-a-time, in a neutral area if possible. Example: We bring one dog at a time outside. We have a training facility, so our dogs are used to having puppies and dogs around. Cats have escape routes and tree houses, and the parrots their stands and cages.
- Dog Tags help if your dog does wanders off at a dog park or in your neighborhood. You can put the dog's name, and deaf, on the tag, with your name and phone number. I train dogs with clickers, whistles and bells. Turns out, Casidy being bilateral, could hear a loud whistle and clicker. I'm sure the neighbors thought I was nuts until I shared that "We have a deaf dog". I whistled to call her in from the yard. Another suggestion came from a friend who said to put a bell on Casidy. She didn't like it – and kept conveniently losing it, or one of the other dogs would tear it off. Like cats with bells on their collars, this serves to alert other people or pets of where the deaf dog is.
- Training: In my book *Awareness Centered Training – ACT*, there is NOT a specific section on training for deaf dogs – but in my strong opinion, depending on whether the puppy was born deaf, or an older dog who had the advantage of hearing goes deaf, it is about the same. Attention is always the first step. The dog needs to enjoy looking you which means relationship and trust. Be creative with hand signals to teach "watch-me, sit, stand, down, gentle, come, enough, wait, stop, take-it and leave-it". To get your dog's attention, stomp the floor with your foot, wave, or, if necessary, a gentle two-fingered tap on their side, not their head. Some people use a flashlight or a laser light. Gary installed motion detector lights that help to this day. I would click the deck light on and off to get Casidy's attention. Turns out, it works for hearing dogs too.
- **As a trainer and behaviorist, I look at this as educational enrichment.** We also help to train and offer team evaluations for potential therapy dog teams. Having a deaf dog has connected us to many who have trained their dog and visit with children who are deaf. It has a positive trickling effect. As with all dogs, the first important step is to be sure we are calm, and, positively have our dog's attention. Even more so, deaf dogs rely on visuals and signs, so they must be looking at you, and in my strong opinion, yes, I have said this twice, enjoying it.
- Be kind and teach! This is with all dogs. If dogs are not doing what we expect, then we aren't shaping the behavior, reinforcing it on time, and in a language (format) they understand.

- **Doggy Diner and Life Rewards:** The key to connecting with all creatures is safety, food, shelter and trust. Teaching dogs by using life rewards (toys, touch, food, play) empowers you, and the dog, to build a trusting relationship. We feed our dogs 2X a day. It's healthier for most dogs, especially if they sit around all day. Where does the energy go? Here's the trump card. If you feed your dogs, deaf or not, 2X a day, this gives you 14 training opportunities every week to teach watch-me, sit, stand, down, come, gentle. In a hurry? That's fine. We multi-task too. Be mindful that puppies/dogs can learn behaviors whether we teach or not, so teaching is more effective and pleasurable. Timing: Well, each dog is different. If we go too fast, they will suffer from sensory overload. Too slow, they'll be bored and likely become destructive. Decide. For example, teach "SIT" for a week while feeding. Then add on "SIT-DOWN" or whatever is most important to you. I know this 100%: Dogs can learn more quickly than we think. If it is relevant to the dog, and we are smiling when they do something we want, like automatic "SIT", we have the power to shape that behavior with a meaningful reward. Puppies or dogs who offer behaviors that are reinforced quickly, "Good Girl" and for a deaf dog, smile and thumbs up, learn more quickly than those forced into to doing behaviors they think are irrelevant.
- You can train and teach as many behaviors and signs as you like, realizing that, as humans, we will inevitably relax our behaviors. I encourage people keep it simple, and look at training as an integration into daily living and learning with dogs. Our lives change. Life is unpredictable. It is not start/stop training – 6 weeks in school – Tadah DONE. It is on a continuum for the dog and us - through life's stages of development and transitions in life.
- **IMPORTANT!** When approaching a sleeping dog, touch gently or tap the floor. Dogs, deaf or not, may startle. Supervise children around all dogs. You can desensitize a dog to touch for waking, slowly, and for adults only. Ask visitors not to coddle but to use the training hand signals they would for their dogs, asking for a "SIT" before petting or giving a treat.
- **Life Rewards** (food, toys, touch, play) are the best to reward the deaf puppy since they cannot hear the tone of our voice. They will focus on your facial expressions and body language. A frown or "thumbs down" can be used for "No, let's try again." A smile, and a thumbs-up or healthy treat, while dog is in a "SIT" means, "Yes, Good Girl".
- Clapping hands is good sign for rewarding behavior promptly. Sure, we look like giddy teens at hockey game who just scored a big one, but it works. To get your dog to come to you joyfully, use open arms and ask for a sit. SIT is akin to us humans saying, "May I please" before pouncing.

- There are many training tips to share. The most basic are the same as for all beginning training for puppies or adopted dogs, with modifications for the deaf dog using visual aids and expressions.

## **Considerations for Dog Parents of Deaf Dogs**

The following are helpful tips based on my experience living and learning with Casidy, and helping others develop a relationship with their puppy / dog with challenges.

The decision to get a dog should be planned and discussed. You may be looking at a 10 – 15-year commitment. Not everyone is up to the challenge of living with a dog, let alone a deaf dog, or multiple dogs. The following discusses special issues to consider when deciding.

### **Learning a New Language**

If you are going to live with a deaf dog, you will have to open your mind. This is a good thing because many of us become stuck in our ways of doing and thinking. You will need to exercise your observational skills, tuning into movement, vibration and light. Learn forms of signing and work on your visual expressions. At first, you will forget. It takes practice to be good at anything. We did. I would be at the stove, stirring soup, and call Casidy, who was sleeping at my feet. If I had turned around quickly, I would have gone ass over board. Plus, she couldn't hear me anyway. Being aware of where they are and what we are doing matters.

### **To Leash, or not? Good Question**

Generally, it is not a good idea to allow a deaf dog off leash in an unenclosed area. This includes walks, dog parks, or accompanying you anywhere outside without side a fenced, secure area. Daycare for a deaf dog could be an anxiety ridden nightmare, unless supervised by someone with serious experience with dogs with disabilities.

Dog parks may cause fear in deaf dogs. Socializing is important - yes. We all want our dogs to be able to interact with other dogs, BUT, safely. Other dogs may not live with, or know how to read a deaf dog's body language or signals and vice versa for the deaf dog. It's as simple as that. Find them a safe doggy friend to play with in the yard.

Some trainers / dog parents who have experience with many dogs, including deaf ones, may let their dog off leash for a walk someplace with minimal activity, knowing that their dog will regularly "check-in" with them. We have two Border Terriers. They can hear just fine. If they were deaf, I would NEVER let them loose. One peep of a chipmunk would send them off into a wild chipmunk chase.

You can use a long leash or Flexi-lead. At a park, using a 30-foot web leash will allow you to throw a ball. Teach the dog to retrieve, bringing the Frisbee or ball back. This allows the dog to run and play, while giving us control over our dog for safety.

## **Desensitization Exercises to Reduce Startling**

These exercises are taught to all dogs who come to our training facility. We have soft flooring, medical equipment, stability balls and play desensitization canine cd's. Dogs are slowly and gently introduced to sights, sounds and smells. We are proactive, teaching dogs to rely on us, and get use to what they will encounter, deaf or not, in the real world.

In team evaluations for therapy dogs, the evaluator will walk up behind a dog and give a "two-finger" tap. They don't slug the dog. Some dogs startle. Others are unflappable. You can easily do this, while walking by their side, with a healthy treat in your right hand, using your left hand to gently touch their backside. Dogs associate. So, allow them to associate getting tapped while getting a treat. PS: Dogs do not like petting on the head. Try it on yourself. It's not comfortable.

Approaching dog-to-dog or human-to-dog should be slowing and at the side. Too much energy into the face of a deaf dog may startle them - or worse. Too much energy launching into any dog's face, who is not used to it, could cause dog fight.

To condition your deaf dog to wake to a gentle touch, place your hand in front of the sleeping dog's nose, allowing him to smell first. Next, lightly touch the dog on the shoulder or back. Hold a treat in front of their nose. I found this worked wonders with Casidy who would wake to a healthy treat, look up at me as if to say, "Oh, it's you again". Remember, gently stroking with finger tips, or make a wand, using a stick with a light string on the end, caressing them with it, while they are awake, then when they are asleep, to assess how the dog will react. Gradually, work up to your entire hand.

If the dog awakes, smile and have a healthy treat to develop a sense of trust. Good things happen when someone taps me.

## **Hello! Getting the Deaf Dog's Attention**

The best thing to do is always ask for a "SIT". Reward a dog who willingly comes to you. If your dog is facing away from you, sounds silly, but WAIT. Remember, you need their attention. The dog who thinks and acts on his/her own learns quicker, especially with praise/reward.

Indoors, if you walk up behind your dog, s/he may feel the vibrations of your approach and turn around. If not, try blowing on the dog's back or head. Or, again, use the wand with a string on the end. This avoids any unnecessary risk, and is safer to teach children, 12 years old and up, to learn how to do this with your supervision.

If the dog is across a room, try stomping your foot on the floor. S/he may feel the vibrations and turn around. You can waive your arms to attract their attention. To call for a Come-on-Recall, arms opened wide – "Casidy, come".

Outdoors, you can try tossing a small stone or ball near your dog to get their attention. Be careful. You don't want to cold-cock your dog. At night, try using a reflective collar so you can see your dog. You can flip the deck lights on or off. As shared, motion detector lights are helpful. We have them everywhere in our yard and training facility. They are worth the investment. Indoors, I discovered a cost-effective motion LED light by GE at Amazon. The plain silver ones are under \$10.00. In the house, they light when motion is detected. At night, this helps everyone, not only the dog!

Some have recommended vibrating collars and laser points. We have two cats – so this could be deleterious. We'd have to put the cats "away" to use that or they would have landed on Casidy's head. Not good. Vibrating collars – okay – these are not shock collars, just a light vibration to get your dog's attention. Never used it.

### **Corrections for a Deaf Dog**

The same as all dogs, and many children. Teaching! The major difference for the deaf dog is make it meaningful and be present – dogs need to be paying attention to YOU. Frowning, with some thumbs-down, is all that is necessary. If a dog gets in the trash, and you do not have time to teach "LEAVE\_IT", then put a lid on the garbage can. Dogs are dogs, even deaf ones. They will learn our body language, and will take advantage of opportunities to explore the "unknown". This may mean running off, sniffing or chewing illegal, or dangerous items. Frowning, hands-on-hips, in our household means, "Oh Oh, better go lie down somewhere." Then, I teach, this is "Mine", this is "Yours" and the time we share together, like popcorn night, is "Ours". Point is – they can learn a lot.

### **Keep the Focus on Abilities, not Disabilities**

Regardless of whether you have a deaf, blind or older dog, we all change as we age. Keeping the focus on the abilities, not the disabilities, helps to balance living with ourselves and our dogs, as we transition in life. Be creative, looking for what we can do, not what we cannot.

As mentioned, this is but a short sharing of living and learning with a deaf dog. Here are few links, including mine. I invite you to [www.dogtalk.com](http://www.dogtalk.com), click on dog talk media and articles / excerpts from my books and publications. *Enjoy the Journey.*

[www.deafdogs.org](http://www.deafdogs.org)

[www.deafdogsrock.com](http://www.deafdogsrock.com)

*Living with a Deaf Dog* by Susan Cope-Becker

Awareness Centered Training – ACT, Maureen Ross, MA

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