



## Deaf Dog Training Tips

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The basic method behind training a deaf dog is the same as training a hearing dog (or any animal): Reward behavior you want to see repeated, and prevent rewards for behaviors you don't want. Dogs do what works — if a certain action results in something they want, they will repeat it.

Of course you need a way of communicating with your deaf dog. It's easy to use visual signals for deaf dogs. Even hearing dogs rely more on vision and body language (after all, dogs don't use spoken words when they interact with each other). You can take advantage of your dog's vision, and also their sense of touch and maybe also their ability to smell.

You will mostly be communicating with your dog through hand signs. Think about what signs you will use before you try to train them. Hand signals must be:

- clear
- distinguishable from other signs and gestures you commonly use
- visible from a distance
- consistent

Don't forget facial expressions and body language, too, though. Your dog will be reading you for that!

### Teaching "Yes"

Your first step will be to establish a sign which means "Yes!" or "That's correct, you've earned a reward!" An easy one is a quick thumbs-up, or a flash of your entire hand, fingers spread wide apart. You can teach your dog what this means by linking your "Yes!" sign with something your dog likes. Food treats work really well in initial stages of training, but don't forget fun toys, exciting games, favorite activities, and good petting, rubbing, and scratching. Simply sign "Yes!" and immediately give your dog a treat. Repeat this a few times. Look for your dog's reaction to the "Yes!" sign — if she pricks up her ears or looks towards the treats, you know she's catching on. At the same time you can say "Yes!" or "Good dog!" out loud — if you mean it, she'll learn your facial expression (and it may help you to remember to reward her).

### Teaching "Watch"

Once you have the "yes" sign trained, you can start using it to teach your dog to do what you want. A very important behavior for the deaf dog is "Pay attention" or "watch me". You'll need another hand sign for this. I like sweeping an index finger up to the front of your face, forming a sort of "J" in the air as you move it; or tapping your finger next to your

eye. You can also teach your dog to look towards you when you stomp your foot — on certain surfaces your dog will be able to feel that through the floor or ground and know to look at you.

To train your dog to watch you, all you need to do at first is reward her for doing it. If she's looking at you, make your "Yes!" sign and reward her. If you need to, you can "lure" her to look at you with a piece of food or a favorite toy — simply wave it in front of her nose and bring it up near your face. Immediately sign "Yes!" and reward her. As she gets comfortable "watching" you, sign "Watch me" as she's doing it, then sign "Yes!" and reward her. This way she'll learn what the "Watch me" sign means.

You can play the "Eye contact game" with your dog by putting a desired treat or toy in your hand and moving both hands behind your back. Wait until your dog glances from the treats to your face. Immediately sign "Yes!" and give her the treat. As she catches on to this, you can leave the treat-hand at your side for a few repetitions, then make it even harder by turning away from her so she has to actively seek out your face to make eye contact.

Now your dog knows it's worth her while to watch you, and knows when she's going to be rewarded. It's time to start teaching her some action commands.

### **Teaching "Sit"**

The best way to teach any animal to perform an action is to catch them in the act of doing it and reward them. For example, if your dog sits down, you can reward her for sitting. To let her know why she's suddenly getting a food treat or special attention from you, use your "Yes!" sign at the moment she sits to mark her action. When you're pretty sure you can predict that your dog is about to sit, you can make a sign for "sit" just before she does it, then follow that up with "Yes!" and a treat.

You can't always catch your dog doing the action you're looking for. An alternative is to use "luring". Luring is especially good for teaching hand signals (in fact hearing dogs have a hard time transferring their cue from the luring hand to the verbal signal). For "sit", hold a food treat or a favorite toy in front of your dog's nose. Move it slowly back over her head, aiming for the space just between her ears. If she's interested enough in the treat, her nose will follow it. Most dogs will lower their butts to the ground as their nose follows the treat. You can immediately sign "Yes!" and give her the treat. After you practice this a few times, see if your dog will sit without the lure. The first time she does, she has earned a "jackpot" — an extra amount of treats, or at least one really special one.

Turn your lure into a hand signal by not holding a treat but making the same motion for the next repetition. If she sits, sign "Yes!" and give her the treat. After this, if you need to use a treat to lure her, don't give it to her as a reward. Pet her and "praise" her with your body language for a moment, then immediately try the hand motion without the food in your hand. If she sits without the food lure, she gets "Yes!"/treat. If she'll only sit if she sees the treat "up front", she hasn't done enough to earn it.

You can "capture" with your "Yes!" sign anything that your dog does right. You can formally train some actions such as "lie down" this way, or you can use it to reinforce general good behavior you see and like. Use "Yes!" and a treat to reward your dog for walking without pulling, for greeting without jumping, for choosing a toy instead of the furniture or the cat as a plaything.

## Teaching “Come”

One of the most important thing you can teach your dog to do is to come when you call her. You’ll need to practice this “recall” a lot before it becomes a habit for your dog to respond to you. Start while your dog is already looking at you. Let her know that you have something that she’d like, and take a few steps backwards. As she follows you, make a sign for “Come” and then sign “Yes!”. When she gets to you, give her the treat. Traditionally the signal for “Come” is holding your hand straight out to your side, palm facing the dog, then sweep the palm of your hand towards your chest. This is pretty visible from a distance. Make sure that you use fantastic rewards for “Come”. Think of the alternatives from your dog’s point of view — would she rather try your reward, or would she rather chase squirrels, investigate smells, play with other dogs, etc.? If you are consistently very rewarding when you signal “Come”, your dog will be more willing to “bet” that your reward will out-rank the other possibilities available to her.

## Teaching “No”

You might think that you would need to teach your dog a sign that means “No!”, too. But for most dogs, “no” is just an interrupter, something that causes a dog to stop what he’s doing. A very friendly method - one apparently used by [Patricia McConnell](#), is to teach “no” as the same thing as “come” - stop what you’re doing and come to me (for a reward). Now obviously if you called a dog to you and rewarded him each time he engaged in some behavior, like chasing the cat, he might think that that chasing the cat is a good thing, because it leads to a recall + reward. So you’re back to management.

Remember, it’s only fair to your dog that you try to teach her what is correct to do before you try to scold her for doing something wrong. So if you fear your dog might sometimes chase the cat, be sure to sign “Yes!” and reward her if she ever treats the cat nicely (or ignores him), before you resort to using “No!”. Your dog wants to know when she’s getting it right; don’t make her afraid to guess — and don’t make her associate the cat only with scary things!

## **A Couple of General Tips:**

Until you’ve established a really good recall (“come”), don’t let your dog off-leash outside in an unfenced area. If your dog does get loose, make sure that you have your name and phone number on a collar tag. You might even want to state on the tag that she’s deaf. Additionally, it would be very wise to get your dog tattooed with an ID number and/or get your vet to insert a tiny microchip. The chip would carry an ID number that any vet or shelter could read. They call a central phone number and are given your contact name and phone number.

Make sure that you don’t startle your deaf dog by “sneaking up on her”, especially if she’s asleep. To wake a deaf dog, place your hand near her nose so she’ll smell you, or scratch the floor or pillow near her so she’ll feel that. Since she may be startled, you can make waking up or sudden touches more pleasant by immediately offering her a treat. You can actually condition your dog to find being startled to be pleasant — just associate something she likes (such as a food treat) with a startle. Watch strangers (especially children) and don’t let them touch her unless she’s recognized that they’re there.