

The basic method behind training a deaf dog is the same as training a hearing dog. Reward behaviour you want to see repeated, and prevent rewards for behaviours 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 (dogs don't use spoken words when they interact with each other). You can take advantage of your dog's vision, sense of touch and ability to smell.

Before you get started on training your deaf dog there is something that you should always remember and be aware of. 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.

You will mostly be communicating with your dog through hand signs. Think about what signs you will use before you try to introduce them. Hand signals must be clear, distinguishable from other signs and gestures you commonly use, visible from a distance, and consistent. Facial expressions and body language are also cues.

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, favourite 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).

Once you have this sign trained, you can start using it to teach your dog to do what you want. A very important behaviour 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. If you get a vibrating collar for your dog, you can teach her that a short vibration means "watch me" (and a longer one can mean, "come").

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.

Using a lure to teach hand signals is a very effective method of teaching position commands. For “sit”, hold a food treat or a favourite 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 butt to the ground as their nose follows the treat. You can immediately sign “Yes!” and give her the treat. After you practice for a few sessions, see if your dog will sit for a hand signal without the lure.

Turn your lure into a hand signal by not holding a treat but making the same motion as when you had a treat in your hand. 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!” and a treat.

For “down”, start in a “sit” and then hold a food treat or a favourite toy in front of your dog’s nose. Move it slowly down towards the ground and either slightly forward or backward. You may have to experiment with this lure to see what works for your dog. When your dog lies down, sign “Yes!” and give her a treat. After you practice this for a few sessions, see if your dog will down without the lure.

Turn your lure into a hand signal by not holding a treat but making the same motion for the next repetition. If she downs, 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 downs without the food lure, she gets “Yes!” and then a treat.

You can “capture” with your “Yes!” sign anything that your dog does right. You can use it to reinforce good behaviour you observe. 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 not chasing the cat.

One of the most important things 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.

Teach a sign for “wrong”. It could be shaking your finger, shaking your head or a facial expression. Teach this by doing the sign when your dog starts to participate in an activity you don’t want her doing. Perform the sign, where your dog can see it, and then redirect her to another activity. Indicate your approval of that activity by signalling “Yes.”

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 she sometimes chases the cat, be sure to sign “Yes!” and reward her if she ever treats the cat nicely (or ignores him), before using the wrong sign. 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 with a negative situation!

General tips: Letting a deaf dog off leash in an unfenced area is risky due to the lack of ability to get your dog’s attention at a distance unless she is wearing a vibrating collar. 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.

Resource:

The [Deaf Dog Education Action Fund](http://www.deafdogs.org), www.deafdogs.org