



Paw Prints

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Columnist

Deafness in dogs

Lately you've noticed that your well-trained furry friend hasn't been coming when called and seems distracted. Could it be hearing loss?

Some dogs can have a temporary hearing loss due to wax build-up in their ear canals, especially dogs with a lot of hair around their ears. A total loss of hearing due to a host of causes such as severe, untreated ear infections, old age or injuries. One or both ears may be affected.

Some dogs are born deaf, which is known as congenital deafness, and it is more common with specific breeds such as Dalmatians and boxers. White dogs also tend to have a high occurrence of deafness. Although researchers still aren't sure what causes congenital deafness,

they do know it's most common in dogs with white or nearly white heads.

Dogs that have hearing loss may appear disobedient and ignorant of commands. A dog with extreme hearing loss will not typically respond if you snap your fingers next to its ears or if you make an unfamiliar noise that would normally cause a reaction from him.

Please take your pooch to the veterinarian if you suspect any hearing loss. Your vet can initially examine your dog's ear canal for wax accumulation, infections, inflammation, injury or a foreign object. You might be surprised that a wax build-up could have been the problem and that it is relieved once the plug of wax was removed.

You may have recently purchased a white puppy and after a couple of weeks found out that your new furry friend may have been born deaf. If you suspect your pup might be deaf, try this test: wait until he is asleep or not looking at you and make a loud noise behind him. Make sure he can't see your movement, or feel any vibrations, like you stomping on the floor. If your dog ignores you and appears to be deaf you might want to ask for a test called the Brainstem Auditory Evoked Response procedure, or BAER. During this test, electrodes are placed under

the dog's scalp to read the brain's response to a series of clicks directed into each ear.

Training a deaf dog isn't difficult. There are many deaf dog rescue organizations that encourage people to adopt a deaf dog. These special-needs dogs can make wonderful pets. You simply communicate with your pooch using signs and body language instead of words.

According to Dick Russell, a dog trainer near Baton Rouge, Louisiana, who has worked with more than 100 deaf dogs in the past 20 years, "It's as easy to train a deaf dog as a hearing dog. The only difference is you use hand signals instead of verbal commands." The secret according to Russell is having a clear hand signal for each action you want your dog to learn, and always being consistent. Deaf dogs, just like hearing dogs, require time, patience and energy devoted to training and socialization to help them become well-adjusted and well-mannered. As with any pooch, it's important to have a trusting relationship and build your dog's confidence through positive interactions.

If you have an older dog that is in the beginning stages of hearing loss, start to incorporate non-verbal cues into training. Reward your furry friend when he comes to you



PHOTO BY JODI SCHNEIDER MCNAMEE

Deafness is fairly common in this breed, the Australian shepherd.

by cue of the hand gesture. Gradually wean him off the verbal command until he is able to follow only hand signals.

One of the most important commands you can teach your deaf dog is the "watch me" command. It is one of the first commands your deaf dog should learn when you start training with hand signals. Your dog will constantly check in by always looking directly at you.

Of course, there are some common-sense steps pet parents of a deaf dog should take.

The first is keeping your furry friend on a leash or in a fenced yard for his safety. A deaf dog can't hear a car or other danger coming.

To better keep track of

your pooch, try putting a bell on his collar and make sure that on Fido's tag it says "DEAF" along with your contact information.

Always let your dog know of your presence around the house. A dog that is deaf will not be able to hear you approaching and may be frightened if you suddenly appear. One way is to lightly pet your pooch on the back and give him a treat when he turns toward you.

Rewarding your dog with treats and physical affection is a must, since a deaf dog cannot hear verbal praise.

Deaf dogs can live normal lives; they just require a little extra care and attention. Deaf dogs can do agility, obedience, and can be wonderful therapy dogs.

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