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## ADVICE SHEET 5

# Teaching basic sign language to dogs

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### Introduction

We may need to teach our dogs some basic sign language for several reasons: as they age many dogs lose some of their hearing, some dogs are born deaf, at a distance on a windy day it may be difficult for your dog to hear you.

Whatever the reason is, dogs naturally watch us for clues and often respond more quickly to body language than words.

The challenge is to:

- choose simple, distinctive signs,
- use the same signs consistently, and
- reward your dog clearly when they get it right!

Using single hand signs generally makes it more practical but you can certainly get more complicated.

Recall is vitally important for dogs that cannot hear you – Barry Eaton's book "Hear Hear" goes through this in detail, but until you are very confident please keep your hearing impaired dog on a harness and long line.

It is VERY important to use rewards-based hands off training with a deaf dog. Your dog should not be nervous of your hands or being grabbed, but keen to look at them and enjoy the training. If you must indicate displeasure a simple wag of the finger plus turning your back for a few seconds will be more than enough.

### How to teach the signs:

- Saying "good dog" First of all we need a simple sign that tells our dog "well done" – the easiest choice is a thumbs up (many people smile as well), make sure your hand is clearly visible to your dog. Make the sign and then deliver a small tasty treat (cubes of cheese are ideal).

*If you want to use clicker training (sometimes called flicker training for deaf dogs) I suggest you have a basic 'good dog' sign that friends and family use as well as a more specific 'clicker sign'. I use a starfish type sign starting with a clenched fist then stretching all fingers out to indicate a 'click'. You can teach this just as you do with a normal clicker by pairing the sign with a treat. You can also use a small pen light to flash a marker but be careful not to shine it directly into the dog's eyes*



2. Hand targets: teaching your dog to follow a hand target or a lure (piece of food in the hand). Offer your hand near to the dog's nose and wait for them to touch it with their nose. Most dogs will do this fairly quickly out of curiosity! When the nose touches your hand give your "good dog" or "clicker" sign with the other hand, then deliver the treat asap. Repeat this exercise until your dog is confidently following your hand as you move it around.



3. Something simple like SIT: once your dog has learned to follow your hand, taking a flat hand, palm upwards, in front of the dog's nose and slowly moving your hand over the dog's head (up and slightly back) should mean they lift their head and start to sit. Immediately give the "good dog" sign and reward.



### **Trouble shooting!**

Dog moves backwards away from your hand – try moving your hand less or position the dog with a wall or chair at their back.

Dog jumps up at your hand – keep your hand much lower and just above their nose.

## Suggested basic cues to teach your deaf dog:

**Sit** – moving hand above the head as described, you can reduce this to a simple palm up to ceiling signal.



**Down** – pointing at the ground (teach by taking your hand all the way to the floor initially, then phase out to just pointing down)



**Come** – come back to me and wait for next instructions, as you do with a hearing dog by opening your arms and encouraging them back to you, this wants to be a big signal to be seen at a distance

**Wait** – stay in one place until I ask you to move, often taught using a flat hand with the palm facing the dog



**Give** – release what is in your mouth, could be a closed fist (which has a treat in it when training initially) or a suitable sign from a sign language dictionary

**Finished** – for example when you have been playing a game or training, both hands facing the dog with crossed wrists, separate your hands in an ‘all done’ gesture

**Follow my hand** (useful when asking the dog to move out of the way, get in or out of the bed/car without having to grab their collar), simple hand target as discussed above.

**Extra resources:**

Barry Eaton’s short booklet “Hear Hear” available from online booksellers

The DDEAF (Deaf Dog Education Action Fund) website and resource centre - USA based but very accessible and fantastic information, also sells bandanas to alert people to your dog’s deafness.  
<http://www.deafdogs.org/>

The Deaf Dog Network (UK)  
Facebook group and website

Any on-line sign language dictionary – great for getting ideas for signs and seeing the visual of how to move your hands. My favourite is:  
<http://www.aslpro.com/>

