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# TIPS

for

# Living

# WITH A

# Special-Needs Dog

Learn the best ways to communicate clearly with your blind or deaf rescue dog.

By Kirsten Stade



**T**he petite white-and-red pitbull terrier I'd brought home to foster seemed just like so many other young shelter dogs I'd taken in. Dahlia was affectionate, energetic and perhaps a bit impulsive, but with a cuddly *joie de vivre* that surely would make it all worthwhile. How hard could it be to foster a deaf dog?

Over the next few days, she frantically humped my leg, persistently nipped and pestered my dog Fozzie (despite his loud protests that had worked with all the other foster dogs) and generally refused to take no (or "Wait" or "Sit" or "Stay") for an answer. I began to wonder about this little bundle of unrestrained energy. How could I communicate with a deaf dog to teach her better life skills?



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As it turns out, deaf dogs and blind dogs are as amenable to training as any dog, although their unique abilities might lead to some behavioral differences.

Dahlia's hyperactivity, although not so different from that of many fresh-from-the-shelter pups, was likely worse due to her missing audible signals from the animals and people around her. Once we agreed upon a language she could understand, Dahlia was eager to learn and one of the most tuned-in dogs I have ever fostered.

All dogs are individuals, but learning simple strategies to care for them, communicate with them and make them feel safe, we can help them realize their potential as joyful and well-adjusted companions.

## DEAF DOG TIPS

- ➔ **Reward spontaneous eye contact.** You can't call your dog to get her attention. But by giving her a tasty treat every time she looks at you, you'll get her in the habit of checking in for further instructions.
- ➔ **Use hand signals for all the behaviors you'd expect from a hearing dog.** You can come up with your own hand signals for Sit, Stay, Leave It — even tricks like Shake and Crawl — or find ideas by checking with a deaf-dog-advocacy group like the nonprofit Deaf Dogs Rock in Salem, Va. (<http://deafdogsrock.com>).
- ➔ **Use a reward marker.** Fans of

clicker training know that the clicker acts as a "marker" so the dog knows exactly when she does the right thing. The precise timing and unusual sound of the click, followed by a treat, accelerates learning. For a deaf dog, a hand signal does the same thing. You

## SENSITIVE SKIN

For deaf dogs with predominantly white fur and pink skin, watch out for sunburn! Minimize exposure to direct sunlight, and put a sunscreen for sensitive skin on those noses and other bald or nearly bald parts.

## SEEING AIDS

- Use **varying floor surfaces** to let your blind dog know where she is. For example, place food and water dishes on a large plastic floor mat, and mark doorways with mats or carpet squares.
- Capitalize on her keen sense of smell by dabbing **scented oils, like vanilla, peppermint and clove**, to orient her to the top and bottom of stairs and to mark her favorite toys.
- Use **insulation around sharp edges of tables and other furniture** to protect against painful bumps. Your dog won't need props and protections for long; many owners are amazed at how quickly their blind dogs learn their way around without bumping into objects or giving any indication at all that they can't see.

can use a "thumbs up" or a "flash" — showing your dog a fist, then rapidly opening and closing all five fingers — to mark your deaf dog's success, then deliver a treat.

➔ **Teach bite inhibition.** According to Christina Lee, founder of Deaf Dogs Rock, deaf dogs might bite too hard in play because they never learned to control themselves in response to a littermate's yelp. Simply end the play and walk away for 15 to 30 seconds when your deaf dog bites too hard, then return and start over. When the play is gentle, use your reward marker and keep playing!

➔ **Some deaf dogs startle easily when touched.** Desensitize by coming up behind your dog when she is not looking at you, then touching gently and giving a treat.

➔ **Don't stop talking!** As you speak, the natural shifts in your body language and facial expression will speak volumes to your deaf dog, who will become a master interpreter of this nonverbal language.

## BLIND DOG TIPS

➔ **When you first bring your blind dog home, take her on a leashed tour of your house** and let her sniff and explore. You can tap on and name each piece of furniture as your dog sniffs.

➔ **Talk to your blind dog often**, especially alerting her before you touch her.

➔ **Teach a few special commands to help your blind dog navigate her world.** Scott Giacoppo adopted his blind Husky mix, Brady, from Washington Humane Society in Washington, D.C., where he is vice president of external affairs. Giacoppo says he taught Brady "Up" to step onto a log across a trail, for example, and "Step" for taking a step down, such as off a curb. "Stop" is a crucial one to know for emergencies.

➔ **A sudden change in environment — like a fresh snowfall — can disorient your blind dog.** Give her more time to explore familiar walkways that are suddenly quite unfamiliar.

➔ **A few additional props can help orient and protect your blind dog** when you first bring her home (see "Seeing Aids").

Once you've mastered a communication system that works for your blind or deaf dog, don't be surprised if she shows a capacity for learning that outstrips those of hearing and sighted dogs! The acuteness of the other senses often more than compensates for the absence of the one that is missing, and the sky's the limit when it comes to learning from, connecting with and loving these special creatures. ✪RP

Kirsten Stade is a holistic dog groomer and trainer who lives with her foster failure, Fozzie, a foster dog or two, and the human they call Dad. She also writes about the broad intersection between dogs and spiritual well-being on her blog, [www.peacefuldog.com](http://www.peacefuldog.com)

## RESOURCES

**Blind Dog Rescue Alliance**  
[www.blinddogrescue.com](http://www.blinddogrescue.com)

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

**Deaf Dogs Rock**  
<http://deafdogsrock.com>

**Owners of Blind Dogs**  
[www.blinddogs.com](http://www.blinddogs.com)

Brady, a blind dog, learned helpful behaviors like "Step" and "Up."