

Breaking the Silence

Owners speak out about their special bond with deaf dogs.

Don Vaughn

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"Dogs communicate by body language, so when you sign to your dog, you should also talk to it," says Becker. "In addition to signing, you are communicating with your dog via facial expressions and body language. When I say 'No' to Spanky, I frown and say 'No' and I'm in a posture that says 'You're in big trouble.' You have to have emotion in whatever you're doing to convey whether something is positive, negative, urgent or play. It's not the words; it's the way you're saying them."

Becker suggested stomping on the floor or clapping loudly to get a dog's attention. The animal will sense the vibrations and turn toward you. Other options include flicking a light on and off, and directing a flashlight in front of the animal.

Deaf dogs can learn quickly. Connie Bombaci of Killingworth, Connecticut, says her deaf Dalmatian Hogan picked up his first two sign - "Sit" and "Cookie" - in less than 24 hours. "Once he picked up 'Cookie,' he was off and running," says Bombaci, who is on the advisory board of the Deaf Dog Education Action Fund. "He watches my hands intently."

For safety reasons, deaf dogs should always be fenced in or kept on a leash when outside, says Becker. "I fenced in our yard when living in Tennessee so Spanky couldn't get out. I built her a \$3,000 playpen." A deaf dog cannot hear an approaching car, for example, so it is at greater risk of accidental injury. Many owners who take their deaf dogs running in open spaces devise broad arm gestures to tell their pets at a distance that it's time to come back.

Interestingly, sign language has many other practical uses. Quite a few professional dogs - including police, show and stunt dogs - are trained to respond to silent as well as verbal commands. "Pet dogs that can hear may also understand more with sign language when there is a lot of background noise that makes speaking difficult," says John Newstead. "It has a lot of uses for dog owners in general."

Training and caring for a deaf dog require a lot of extra work, but most owners say the rewards are well worth it. "Deaf dogs have a lot of love to give," says Bombaci. "My life has become more enriched with my deaf dogs. They add an element of closeness, a bond that is very special. They are the same as any other dog, except you communicate with them in a different way."

Becker agreed. "The greatest reward is a connection that goes beyond the typical pet-owner bond. You realize your dog is working to please you, to do what is expected of it. And it's doing that in the face of a great obstacle. Living with a deaf dog constantly teaches us the importance of communication, trust, tolerance, love and patience. In short, living with a deaf dog teaches us how to be a little more human."