

Breaking the Silence

Owners speak out about their special bond with deaf dogs.

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Almost from the start, Susan Cope Becker noticed her Boston Terrier pup behaved oddly. Spanky looked normal and healthy but didn't respond to Becker's voice or whistles and, when they played, bit her until she bled, even though Becker yelled out in pain.

When Spanky gleefully ran up to examine a roaring vacuum cleaner, Becker's worst fears were confirmed. A normal dog would have run from the machine in terror. "My mouth just fell open," says Becker. "I thought, 'This dog is deaf!' I had never even heard of a deaf dog. I didn't know deaf dogs existed. I thought they all could hear."

After some quick research about canine deafness, Becker learned deaf puppies are routinely euthanized because of supposed aggression and training difficulties. "I held Spanky close to me and wept," she wrote in *Living With a Deaf Dog* (self-published, 1997). "I decided I would find a way to deal with this and I would not, under any circumstances, put Spanky to sleep."

Becker represents one of many in a growing movement working to change the way breeders, veterinarians and the public view canine deafness. In researching her book, Becker found many common beliefs about canine deafness are unsubstantiated by clinical studies. She found deaf dogs as intelligent and trainable as dogs that hear - and equally as loving.

"The greatest challenge is in the beginning, when you feel sorry for your dog," says Becker from her home in Cincinnati. "You pity the animal because it can't hear. You think you're never going to be able to communicate with your dog or train it. But once you have your first breakthrough, such as teaching your deaf dog its first sign, you realize there are no obstacles at all."

Congenital deafness affects more than 60 breeds. According to the non-profit Berkeley, California-based Deaf Dog Education Action Fund, a referral organization for owners of deaf dogs, prevalence is highest among Dalmatians, Australian Cattle Dogs, Australian Shepherds, Bull Terriers, Catahoula Leopard Dogs, English Cocker Spaniels and English Setters. Hearing loss in both ears is known as bilateral deafness. A dog with at least partial hearing in one ear is considered unilaterally deaf.

Heredity plays a big role in congenital canine deafness, says Michael Moore, DVM, associate professor of small animal medicine at Washington State University College of Veterinary Medicine in Pullman. In many cases, the condition can be linked to two pigmentation genes - the merle gene and the piebald/extreme piebald gene. As a result, increased amounts of white in the coat may indicate an increased likelihood of hearing loss.