

Communicating with hearing impaired and deaf canines

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Date : April 1, 2011

Maria Thompson talks to Karen Lawe about improving the lives of deaf dogs through obedience training

DEAF and hearing-impaired dogs may be getting a rough deal due to limited knowledge and understanding of how to deal with a deaf canine.

Many deaf dogs are not recognised as such due to their owner's ignorance and, instead, can be wrongly considered wayward or naughty.

These dogs can end up in rescue homes very quickly where, again, their needs are not always fully understood and the animal consequently struggles to find an owner.

However, there is hope, as trainers and behaviourists become more aware of the needs of the deaf dog they are doing their best to increase knowledge and understanding of the topic.

In fact, one trainer has made it her mission to create a better understanding of the deaf dog and is building an internet resource where people can share experiences or find information from both professionals and owners.

Karen Lawe, who runs pet dog training groups in High Wycombe and Harrow, recently set up the Deaf Dog Network with a website and Facebook page. The network is in the early stages, but already contains useful training videos and information. Karen has first-hand experience of training deaf dogs and took on her own dog, Gollum, from a rescue centre because he was deaf.

She has had him from eight weeks of age and now, as a fully grown Boxer, he has opened a new world to Karen, who says she has a better rapport with him than with any dog she has trained before.

She said: "I watch his body language all the time, and for me, a dog watcher, that's a lot.

"There seems to be very little scientific research or resources out there specifically relating to deaf dogs. It would be great to hear from people who have experience to try to build a clearer picture."

Karen presented a lecture on the subject at the Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors annual conference, using Gollum to demonstrate how well a dog responds to hand signals and body language.

For any dog, a big crowd offers a distraction, yet Gollum rose to the challenge and demonstrated his ability to "check in" and follow simple commands such as "sit" and "good boy".

Speaking at the conference held in March in Kettering, Karen said: "If a dog has been deaf since a very young pup and this has been misinterpreted as naughtiness, willfulness or stubbornness and punished or not recognised, then that dog is far more likely to show behavioural and anxiety-based problems."

Karen went on to say many rescue centres do not have foster carers with deaf dog experience and, in the main, deaf dogs take longer to rehome due to the myths surrounding them, such as, they are untrainable or can never be let off the lead.

Deafness testing

If an owner or trainer suspects a dog is deaf, Karen suggested a few practical ways to establish this, such as banging saucepans, jangling keys or squeaking a toy when the dog is asleep.

However, with some of these methods it should be taken into account the dog could be responding to vibration or smell.

And some dogs may still be able to pick up on high or low sound ranges.

The official hearing test is the brainstem auditory evoked response (BAER) test. This accurately diagnoses unilateral deafness and that a dog has little or no hearing in certain ranges bilaterally. It is not painful, but may be uncomfortable and there are cost implications to consider.

Methods of communication

Dogs use their faces and bodies to communicate to other dogs so using our own body language

and facial expressions to “talk” to a deaf dog makes sense.

Karen advises people build a dictionary of cues before attempting to teach them. Nothing is set in stone until the dog has understood and accepted the command and, as with any training, consistency is key.

“Once you have decided on the appropriate techniques for the dog you are working with and your own physical capabilities, it is best to forward plan with signs and cues you will use to teach or shape different behaviours in varying environments – and learn them yourself before teaching the dog. Look at your own facial and body expression in the mirror or on video clips to see what you do when you say certain things. As silly as it may sound, you should still talk to your deaf dog as you would a dog with hearing, it is more natural.

“Last, but by no means least nor a necessity, is another dog that does have hearing, as quite often a deaf dog will follow the example of a dog with hearing.”

A smiley face and thumbs-up, followed by a treat, can be used to show the dog he has done well, where as a wagging finger and displeased face would mean no.

A gentle rub on the shoulder or a hand close to its nose can be used to wake a sleeping dog.

Other tips included wearing high-visibility clothing and using a torch at night to recall.

Karen said: “In my home, any deaf dog is taught that the patio light going on and off means come back in from the garden, and a torch flashing indicates the same in other dark environments.”

Potential problems

As with any dog, successful training depends on various factors such as previous experiences the animal may have had, breed, socialisation, environment and the owner’s awareness.

According to Karen, some deaf dogs can also suffer with separation issues.

“It has been my experience that where it is known a dog is deaf and that dog has always been communicated with in a positive way, it can be as well-rounded as any dog with hearing.”

Further information

Karen is keen to hear from anyone with experience of deaf dogs. You can email her at thedeafdognetwork@hotmail.co.uk. She also hopes to run workshops for people interested in learning more about training and working with deaf dogs. You can visit the Facebook page at [thedeafdognetwork@groups.facebook.com](https://www.facebook.com/thedeafdognetwork@groups.facebook.com)

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