

Getting a Canine Good Citizen Award with Your Blind and Deaf Dog

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In this article, I will be referring to exercises required for the AKC (American Kennel Club) Canine Good Citizen evaluation. The rules and more information about this activity can be found by contacting the AKC or searching their website. This article is not meant to give you all the rules for the evaluation, but is meant as a guide to assist you with teaching your blind and deaf dog the exercises and when taking the evaluation. It's a good idea to take a few minutes prior to the test to speak with the evaluator about any modifications that your particular dog needs to be successful.

1. Accepting a friendly stranger. Your dog should remain by your side while a person approaches you, shakes your hand and spends a minute or two talking to you. Your dog can sniff the person, but should not be jumping on them, tangling them in the leash, or acting afraid. This one probably doesn't require any special modifications to evaluate. You can easily practice this one when you are out for a walk, or when guests come to your home. As people stop to ask you about your dog, reinforce your dog for calm behavior.
2. Sit politely for petting. I spoke with my evaluator ahead of time as to which touch cues I would be using with Treasure. Touching your dog is allowed during the test, but forcing the dog is not, so I wanted to be sure she recognized that my touching Treasure was actually for the purpose of giving her cues. I actually showed her the cues I would be giving prior to the evaluation so she would not have to guess what I was asking Treasure to do. I gave the touch cue to sit and then I put my hand lightly on Treasure's shoulder, which is her cue that someone else will be touching her so she doesn't startle. Our cue for sit is a touch to the top of the tail. The extra cue was taught because Treasure does therapy work and many different people touch her, often unexpectedly. I taught it as a courtesy to her since she can't see a person reaching like other dogs. My touch cue gives her a moment to prepare for someone's touch.
3. Appearance and grooming. This really didn't require any modification for Treasure. I touched her lightly to let her know someone else would be touching her and she stood calmly for the grooming and examination. Doing lots of practice ahead of time can be helpful so your dog calmly allows other people to check her ears and feet, and brush her lightly.
4. Out for a walk. This exercise shows that your dog will walk with you on a loose leash, taking cues to turn right, left, a 180 about turn, and to stop when you stop. You may have your own way of walking your dog that works for you, so just take a moment prior to the evaluation to discuss it with your evaluator. Treasure follows closely behind me, as she likes to air scent and follow my path. The important thing is that your dog easily follows your cues for turns and stops and the leash is not forcing your dog to stay with you or turn a certain way. Treasure follows very subtle leash cues from a loose leash. These can be taught with practice. You can also use touch cues, but again, these should not be construed as forcing your dog to do the exercise.



5. Walk through a crowd. Well, it's a small crowd of several people milling around. I have a smaller dog and it's not comfortable for me to walk hunched over to guide Treasure around moving people, so we also use a solid leash. The solid leash is a solid piece from my hand to near the snap on her collar. It allows me to easily give her collar cues to guide her and keep her close to my leg. I felt the solid leash would be more suitable for a situation walking close to me and moving around through a crowd of people and distractions. I discussed both options with the evaluator and she agreed with me that the solid leash made more sense in this situation.



6. Sit and down on cue and staying in place. You will need to show that your dog will sit and lie down on cue. You will be allowed to choose the position your dog will stay in (sit or down). It makes sense to choose the position that your dog is most likely to stay in the longest. With most dogs, that will be the down position, but choose wisely for your individual dog. You will need to walk away 20 feet, turn around and return to your dog. You must return to your dog without them getting up from their position until the evaluator tells you to release your dog.
7. Come when called. You will call your dog to come to you from a distance of 10 feet. Some people use a touch stick to reach out and give their dog a touch cue to come to them. I prefer to use something I always have with me – my breath. I use a cue of blowing toward Treasure for her long distance recall cue. She smells and feels my breath and follows it back to me. I did discuss this with the evaluator ahead of time as well. If you use a breath cue and it's a breezy day and the test is held outside, it may be worth asking if you can start up closer to your dog to give the recall cue and then move backwards, continuing to call your dog, until you reach the 10 foot mark.
8. Reaction to other dog. You and another handler (with a dog) will approach each other. Your dog must stay by your side and not be overly interested in the other dog while you and the other handler talk for a moment and then continue on your way. This is another one that can be practiced when you are out for a walk or are at dog class. It can be a scary thing for some blind dogs when another dog approaches because they can't read the other dog's body language to know if it's friendly or not. Go slowly and build up your dog's confidence.
9. Reaction to distraction. This is something your evaluator may wish to discuss with you ahead of time. The crowd may need to alter their distractions a bit. Some of the distractions used for Treasure's test were dropping items close to her so she could feel the vibration, banging pans near her – also to produce a vibration, passing very close to and brushing up against Treasure unexpectedly, and running past her while stomping their feet heavily. Your dog is allowed to notice the distraction, but should be calm and focused on walking with you. This is similar to walking through the crowd, but the helpers will be adding in distractions.
10. Supervised separation. The evaluator will hold your dog's leash while you leave the area for three minutes. Your dog is not supposed to get overly upset. I didn't need to ask for any modifications for this part. If your dog is likely to get upset about being left with a stranger, you may want to train in a special cue that lets your dog know that you will be returning. You can then practice with your dog until it can wait calmly for you to return. You may not give your dog a stay cue for this exercise.