

Good Dog!

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One of the first things to teach your deaf or blind-deaf dog is a signal that means Good Dog. You will use this signal to teach your dog new things and to reinforce behaviors that you like so they will happen more often in the future. The signal can be anything you wish as long as it can be given quickly and consistently.

Borrowing from sign language, the sign for good involves a flat hand moving from the person's mouth downward in an arc. Many owners of deaf dogs choose to use this signal. I choose to use a thumbs-up hand gesture since I work with visually impaired dogs as well. My signal doesn't require the dog to be able to see up to my face if I am standing. I can put my thumb down closer to the dog's field of vision. I also use a signal of clapping my hands to help show the dog I am excited.

Deaf dogs also take cues from your body language, so when you give the Good Dog signal, make sure your face and body look happy. I usually talk to my deaf dogs when I sign to them. Our bodies take on the energy of our words. So if I am using a happy praise voice when I say Good Dog, and I give the signal at the same time, my dog gets more information. My face is happy as I am speaking, and my body motions also convey my excitement. You can also give signals and gestures in many different ways. You can give the good dog signal in a calm soothing way if you don't want your dog to get too excited. You can give it in a very excited way to get your dog revved up and jumping around. There are many possibilities. Just as we have many voice tones, we have many ways of moving our bodies.

For my blind-deaf dog, I use touch to show her that she did something I liked. I know her favorite places to be scratched and they convey my pleasure. I still talk to her when I praise. Our bodies respond differently dependent upon our words and the intention behind those words. My touch will feel different to her if I am happy, or frustrated, or tired, or excited. I can calm her with my touch. I can also get her excited and more energetic with my touch.

To teach your dog the Good Dog signal, you will need to find several things that your dog already likes and finds enjoyable. For many dogs these include food treats, toys, a game of tug, petting, going in or out of a door, or any countless other options. Give the Good Dog signal and then immediately do one of these fun things. For the ease of this article, I will choose to use food treats, but if your dog is not interested in food treats, you can use something else.

Do this many times until your dog starts to respond to the Good Dog signal by looking at you intently waiting for that treat. Now start to use the Good Dog signal at other times throughout the day. When your dog does something that you like, give the Good Dog signal and then follow it up with the treat. In the beginning it will help to continue to use a treat after the Good Dog signal to really cement its importance into your dog's mind.

As time goes on, you can use the Good Dog signal with other rewards. If your dog normally jumps and barks at the back door to go out, you can reward that short moment of calm and quiet with the Good Dog signal and then let your dog out as the reward. If your dog gives you a toy nicely during play time, use the Good Dog signal and then toss the toy again as a reward.

Try to always use the Good Dog signal when it will be followed by something your dog will like. If you use it and then immediately give your dog a bath, or cut its nails, or give it medicine, (things your dog won't like) your dog will learn to be wary of the signal. There may be times when these things need to happen, but don't make it a habit. Always try to follow the Good Dog signal with something the dog thinks is wonderful! You are, after all, telling him how wonderful you think he is!

***Debbie Bauer** is a certified Healing Touch for Animals® practitioner, a certified Tellington TTouch® practitioner, a published author, and a professional dog trainer. She has over 28 years of training and consulting experience working with dogs and their people. She specializes in working with dogs that display fearful, reactive and aggressive behaviors, in a positive manner. Debbie has trained dogs in a variety of fields including therapy and assistance dogs, print ad and media work, obedience, agility, and scent work. One of her passions is working with and educating about deaf, blind, and blind/deaf dogs.*