



Hearing dogs

Hearing Dogs for Deaf People was launched at the world famous Crufts Dog Show in 1982. They have continued to train dogs to alert deaf people to specific sounds, whether in the home, workplace or public buildings.

To date they have placed more than 900 hearing dogs throughout England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

All hearing dogs are trained by forming positive associations with sounds, using food, praise or toys as rewards. These are sounds that hearing people often take for granted such as:

- alarm clock
- cooker timer
- doorbell
- telephone
- a baby crying

On hearing any of these sounds, a hearing dog will seek out his deaf recipient and touch them with a paw. When the recipient asks "What is it?" the hearing dog will lead them to the source of the sound.

A hearing dog is also trained to alert to danger sounds such as:

- smoke alarm
- fire alarm
- carbon monoxide alarm
- burglar alarm

A hearing dog will alert his recipient to these danger or emergency sounds by touching with his paw, and then lying down in a special 'alert signal' to indicate danger. The recipient instantly knows that there is danger and can take the necessary action to ensure their own safety and that of their dog.

Hearing dogs are a hotch-potch selection of dogs

For many people, the sight of a hearing dog, proudly displaying his burgundy jacket as he accompanies his deaf recipient in all situations, can be a surprise, if not a shock. The average hearing dog is a small, mixed-breed dog who will very likely have been selected from a dog pound, rescue centre or as an unwanted pet. He does not need to be physically large to keep an ever-open ear for a sound and run to tell his deaf owner about it by touching him with his paw ? but he does need to be alert and full of enthusiasm. Not only that, but he needs to be sociable and relaxed in all public situations. And of course he needs to have received many weeks of careful and consistent training to ensure that he knows the correct way to behave. (Incidentally, there are as many female as male hearing dogs ? all are neutered ? but for simplicity here we have referred to the hearing dog as ?him?).

The three stages of training

In order to qualify as a hearing dog, each candidate must pass through three stages of training: socialisation training, advanced soundwork training, and home placement training. The first stage takes place in a volunteer puppy socialiser's home, to ensure that the recently selected puppy or dog becomes familiar with a whole range of situations including traffic, crowds of people, loud noises and trips to the veterinary surgery. The puppy socialiser also attends puppy training courses at the Charity's Training Centre to ensure that early obedience lessons start off well. Click here to go to 'Dog lovers needed' All dogs that pass through this first training stage then commence advanced soundwork training, which takes 4 months to complete. It is during this intensive training course that each dog is taught to respond to specific sounds. The dog learns to alert his handler by touching with a paw and then leading back to the source of the sound. Every dog is individually trained for his chosen deaf recipient's needs. In the case of the emergency alarms the dog learns to alter his response by initially touching but then dropping to the floor at his handler's feet. This response clearly indicates that it is an unusual emergency situation and that leading to the source could be dangerous.

The third and final stage of training takes place in the deaf recipient's home. This course takes three months to complete, with one of the Charity's mobile trainers ? or ?Placement Officers? ? working for periods of time not only in the dog's new home, but also in the local shops and on the normal walks. Furthermore, visits are paid to the local veterinary surgeon to commence the hearing dog's on-going healthcare programme. Click here to go to 'Dog sponsorship'

So how is it done?

All hearing dogs are trained using a method of training which involves linking their soundwork with something that the particular dog really likes. This is known as ?conditioning? ? mainly operant conditioning, but with an element of classical conditioning too. The dog looks forward to his soundwork in the same way as he looks forward to his dinner or his walk. Think of the excitement when the dog's food dish comes out of the cupboard?this is a result of the dog having learned to associate the bowl with food and therefore anticipate the imminent arrival of a nice meal. Similarly, many dogs will ?jump through hoops? with excitement at the sight of the overcoat and wellies coming out of the cupboard. By the time the lead is produced a dog may be at fever-pitch?and all because he has built up an association between these objects and WALKIES TIME! So you can see the power of association, which can turn an everyday object into a signal of great importance.

Sounds fun

For a hearing dog it is the sounds themselves - alarm clocks, doorbells, cooker timers, phones, smoke alarms etc - which are the signals heralding the imminent arrival of some major doggy treat. Not only does this make for a dog that works well and with enthusiasm, it also makes training fun and exciting for both dog and trainer. The hearing dog can't wait to leap into action and tell his deaf owner about the

sounds, because he knows that a really nice treat, or game, or extra-special pats will be the result. (Remember, we select dogs that, generally speaking, do like to be in their owner's good books and enjoy being praised.) Indeed, many dogs will teach themselves more sounds after being placed, so much do they enjoy the game.

The finished product

After all the fun and games that go into the training we end up with something really special ? a dog working in partnership with a deaf recipient. The adventures that they share through life are many and varied - suffice to say that they have many laughs along the way as well as shared tears through the bad times. [Click here to go to 'Our recipients'](#)

Hearing Dogs for Deaf People provide lifelong aftercare for all their hearing dogs by means of arranging visits and phone calls from their trainers. Not only do the dogs help by alerting to sounds, but also by providing companionship. Many people, deaf or hearing, may find it easier or less stressful to communicate with their dog than with other human beings, and recipients of hearing dogs commonly feel less anxiety and depression after having their hearing dogs placed with them. Not only that, but the hearing dog helps to identify the nature of his handler's invisible disability, because he wears a distinctive burgundy coat advertising that he is accompanying a deaf person. Members of the public then take time to communicate more carefully, having understood that the recipient is deaf. Lipreading becomes easier and misunderstandings are reduced.

Hearing Dogs as a blueprint for pet owners

Based upon mutual respect and understanding Hearing Dogs for Deaf People believe this partnership is a good blue-print for every dog owner. Not only that, but they see on a daily basis how dogs that have been rescued can re-adjust to a new life after careful and patient training. Have fun with your dog - train him kindly and treat him well and he will repay you a thousand times over!

[Lion Penny Tregillus](#) (MD Speech/Hearing Officer)

Useful Links

- [Leo Clubs](#)
- [Lions Clubs International Foundation](#)
- [Lions Clubs International](#)
- [Lioness Clubs](#)