

## ADOPTING A VISUALLY AND HEARING-IMPAIRED DOG

Dogs may end up visually and hearing-impaired for many reasons and at different stages of their lives. Being visually and hearing-impaired is especially common among double merles, a condition that occurs when a dog receives the merle pattern gene mutation from both parents. Luckily, there are many resources available regarding the care and training of visually and hearing-impaired dogs. Adopting one of these dogs can come with a lot of challenges, but once you learn to communicate with your new dog, you'll share a very special bond. Visually and hearing-impaired dogs can make great companions, but require very special adopters. This handout will provide you with a few recommendations to get off on the right foot with this new member of your family.

### Getting started

Initially, you'll need to spend a lot of time with your dog to form a bond and help him feel secure. Your touch will need to be your voice. In the beginning, you'll want to make sure he views your touch as both calming and positive, so you will want to pair delicious treats with petting and touching. One touch equals one treat, delivered right as you touch him – don't wait for a reaction. Touch his body with different amounts of pressure in different places, always pairing touch with treats and being aware of his body language to decipher if he is becoming uncomfortable. If so, back off and move slower, using less pressure and moving away from more sensitive areas. Once your dog is comfortable being touched, you may also want to practice touching him while he's asleep, then giving him a treat immediately. This will help him get used to waking up by being touched without startling him and causing him to be fearful.

Set up a crate for your dog that will be comfortable and safe. Consider leaving items in there that smell like you, which can help the dog feel more secure. Leave the crate door open during the day so he may go in and out as he pleases. Follow the crate training protocol described in the "Adopting a Shelter Dog" packet to ensure the dog forms a positive association with the crate.

### Setting up your home

Use textures to guide your dog. Set up rugs, mats, and blankets throughout the house so your dog can feel and smell their way around. Be sure not to move these items, as that may confuse your dog and make it more difficult to learn his way around. You can use different textures for different things. For instance, use one type of material under the dog's food and water, and another type in front of the door going outside, and yet another at the top and bottom of a staircase. Use baby gates to block stairs and other off-limits areas from your dog until he has mastered them.



You can also use scent to guide your dog around the house. Put different scents in different rooms or on the floor textures you use to guide the dog through the house. You may use an appealing scent like lavender for areas that are dog safe, and less appealing scents like citrus for areas that are not safe for the dog. Don't forget - you'll need to refresh them often. Scent may also help when teaching your dog to walk on leash or follow you. You can also spray an appealing scent on your shoes or a wooden spatula and hold it in front of the dog as you walk. This will give him something to follow, since he can't use his sight or hearing to navigate or follow.

When showing your dog around your house or another new space, walk around with him as he is harnessed and leashed. Having a harness with a bumper, such as a 'halo' harness, will help your dog learn to navigate without bumping his head into objects in the environment. Be sure to pair this type of equipment with treats to form a positive association. Eventually he will have the house mapped out and be able to navigate smoothly. You'll also need to harness and leash your dog when going outside until he learns the layout of

your yard. Remember that moving objects in or outside of your house may disrupt your dog's ability to navigate, so start this process all over in the event of moving furniture or other scenarios like this. Once your dog is comfortable in the house, teach your dog to go up and down stairs by placing a delicious treat on the stair. Hold on to his harness and gently encourage him as he moves toward the treat without pushing or pulling. Work on one step at a time over several days or weeks. Go at the dog's pace and don't force him to do anything.

Use a harness rather than a collar, as you have more control over the dog's movement and don't place as much pressure around his neck. Consider using a bandana or jacket that says "Visually and hearing-impaired Dog",



so people don't startle him. Your dog will always need to be harnessed and leashed in new environments, as he will rely on you to show him around. Keep in mind if your dog gets loose, you won't be able to call him back to you (unless you have specifically trained this behavior), so do not let your dog off leash unless you're in a familiar, secured area. These dogs cannot see or hear cars, people, or other dogs, so they are in grave danger if they get loose.

### Training your new dog

Training visually and hearing-impaired dogs requires you to be more imaginative than needed for training a dog with his hearing and sight. They will rely mainly on tactile (or touch) cues. Thus, to cue certain behaviors, you'll need to incorporate something they can feel. This is often trained by touching the dog on a certain part of its body a certain way (e.g., touching under the chin lightly for 'come'), or could even be a puff of air or blowing toward them with your mouth, which also incorporates scent from your breath.

Many commands can be trained just as you would train a dog with hearing and sight, with minor modifications using scent and touch. For 'sit', you can lure your dog into a sit position by placing a treat in front of his nose, then over his head. As soon

as his backside hits the ground, deliver the treat. Once the dog starts picking it up after many repetitions, introduce the tactile cue – for instance, two light taps on his side or back. Eventually, you'll be able to 'cue' the dog to sit by tapping lightly on his side or back.

Keep training sessions short and end on a positive note so training is fun for your dog. For training videos and other useful information, check out Keller's Cause Deaf and Blind Dog Rescue at [kellerscause.com](http://kellerscause.com). Some owners of visually and hearing-impaired dogs recommend using a force-free vibration collar. These can be safely incorporated into training, but the device may be very scary for the dog initially. Check out Keller's Cause for more information about training your dog to use a vibration collar.

Visually and hearing-impaired dogs tend to have issues with mouthing. Prevention is key! Puppies learn to inhibit their bites by playing with their littermates, and eventually people. When a puppy bites too hard, their littermates will yelp and people will scream 'ouch!'. Visually and hearing-impaired puppies don't receive this feedback, which may make it more difficult to learn to control their mouths. One way to deal with this behavior is to stop playing or remove yourself if your dog bites too hard.

Resume gently interacting with him after a few moments once he calms down. Resist the urge to tap his nose or grab his mouth and clamp it shut. This can scare



your dog, and doesn't really teach him anything. Using their mouths is a normal dog behavior, so rather than punishing this behavior, you'll need to teach him how to use his mouth appropriately. Encourage your dog to play with a toy rather than your hands so he does not learn that mouthing hands constitutes play, and redirect him to a toy if he's chewing on something he shouldn't be. Use a lot of praise through touch and treats to encourage desirable behavior like appropriate play so he can learn how to behave in a well-mannered way with people, especially when he is still a young puppy. By teaching your dog these skills as a puppy, you'll be setting him up for success as an adult.

## Animal behavior questions?

## Contact our FREE Behavior Helpline!

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