

Advice for owners of a blind dog

My passion for blind dogs started when I adopted a little mongrel called Peaches. She had been recently blinded by acid and was in desperate need of a home. I had no previous experience of blind dogs but I needn't have worried. Peaches taught me everything I needed to know and I learnt how to enable her to lead a happy, active life. There was nothing she couldn't do and every day she surprised and inspired me.

Having seen Peaches run off lead, play with other dogs, swim in the sea, chase rabbits and hunt mice, it always surprised me in practice when dog owners questioned the possibility of a continued quality of life and even considered euthanasia when they were told their dog may become or was already blind. It is undoubtedly difficult for owners to imagine how a dog will cope with blindness in addition to feeling ill-equipped to help them adjust. I have had countless conversations with owners encouraging them to give their dogs a chance to adapt to being blind and reassuring them that they will need very little help during the transition. Thankfully, the vast majority of owners have been willing to give their dogs a chance and have undoubtedly been surprised when life continues with only very minor adjustments. Veterinary staff are ideally placed to support owners through this difficult time and prevent the unnecessary euthanasia of blind dogs.

One of the most difficult challenges for owners is not to suddenly want to wrap their pet in cotton wool and feel sorry for them. This seems to be especially true of owners of dogs who have undergone bilateral enucleation. The physical removal of eyes even after bilateral blindness is always a very emotional event for owners. However, dogs are highly adaptive creatures and they are not subject to human emotions like self-doubt or embarrassment. Dogs may be tentative while they map new environments but they don't overthink mistakes or stumbles. It is important to allow a blind dog to find their own adaptive mechanisms and new ways of 'seeing' and interpreting environments. Owners who try to micromanage every step to prevent stumbles or obstacles can hinder their dog developing their own techniques. Similarly, owners imposing limitations on their dogs can prevent them from enjoying full and active lives. I have heard of many owners of blind dogs believing the dog can never be allowed off a lead, which is of course untrue. With minimal safeguarding and management, blind dogs can exercise freely in safe areas, even if they are in a new environment.

I have always tried to encourage owners to focus on the few positive changes they can implement rather than dwell on worry and pity.

Commands: A stop command is incredibly useful but a 'be careful' command is often essential. My blind dogs know that stop means a dead stop, but a 'be careful' means they need to slow down and take more care in their environment as there is an obstacle or danger ahead. 'Up' and 'Down' commands are great for curbs and steps. Stepping down often requires more confidence from a blind dog but tapping a foot or a hand on descending levels is a great way to help a dog assess how far down they need to step. There are of course infinite commands a blind dog can learn, and owners may find their dogs are much more receptive to oral cues than sighted dogs. Many of the basic commands can be learnt by using cue words when dog finds an obstacle or makes a mistake.

The home environment: Keep furniture in the same place in the house. This is an obvious tip, but dogs will quickly build up confidence moving around areas they know well. Moving furniture regularly can undermine this confidence. However, dogs can map new environments very quickly so it's not to say that furniture can never be moved. Keeping areas tidy and free of items like shoes and bags is

essential. These ever-moving obstacles can be difficult for blind dogs to navigate. I personally have never owned a coffee table! The sharp corners always seem to be at exactly the right height for dogs to bump into. Scenting furniture edges with a 'negative' scent like a lemon polish or citronella can help dogs avoid sharp edges or door frames.

Inside doors being sometimes open or closed can be confusing for a blind dog so having consistency or even removing doors is helpful. Dogs seem to sense large, dense objects with little difficulty, but when obstacles have a narrow or light profile, they are much more difficult to sense and avoid.

Having a tv or radio on in the same place within a room can help dogs to orient themselves indoors and wind chimes at external doors can help with orientation.

Gardens:

Textural changes from grass to gravel or bark chips are a great way of signalling obstacles such as trees, bushes and fences. Ponds can be particularly hazardous for blind dogs and I would always recommend removing ponds or having a rigid lid fitted. Again, tall slim obstacles such as washing line poles are difficult for a blind dog to sense. Padding them with foam cladding often helps. Large, flat grassy areas can encourage blind dogs to feel confident and secure enough to run and play at speed.

Walks:

Being vigilant for obstacles including potholes, uneven ground, puddles, curbs and steps and giving oral cues for these potential problems can give great confidence to dogs when out walking. Developing trust in their owners allows blind dogs to move confidently on a lead. If a dog is struggling to adapt, sometimes a lead through a PVC pipe can allow the owner to steer a dog gently in either direction around objects. In the early stages of blindness it can be helpful to walk similar routes but as soon as the dog is confident, there is no reason to stick to the same walks and routes. Blind dogs will enjoy exploring new environments in the same way as sighted dogs. In safe areas, blind dogs can of course be allowed off lead if they have good recall and other basic safety commands. Beaches are great for blind dogs as they have wide open spaces with few obstacles and they can easily orient themselves to the sound of the sea.

Play:

There are many toys that incorporate sound or scent that are perfect for blind dogs but many will be able to chase and follow a regular ball that is bounced or rolled along the ground. Balls with bells side can be good for longer distance chases. Interactive toys like treat dispensers are excellent and most blind dogs will be able to work out even the most complex interactive puzzles with hidden treats.

Training:

Blind dogs become very tuned in to oral cues but there are often many visual elements to classic dog training methods. This can make it difficult for owners to join public training classes with blind dogs. They are also unable to see a behaviour in another pet and replicate it. I encourage many dog owners to use a capture technique with blind dogs - capturing and rewarding a naturally occurring behaviour and attaching a command.

Socialisation:

It is important to remember that blind dogs will find it harder to understand and interpret the body language of other dogs and therefore may not display the correct body language back to other dogs.

Introductions should be carefully managed in order that the dogs can use other forms of communication such as smell and touch in order to meet a strange dog

Other family dogs can be an enormous help to blind dogs. They often use other pets in the home to help them move around their own environment as well as out on walks. Having a sighted dog can encourage a blind dog to run and play in a safe place but it is important to understand that the sighted dog could unintentionally run them into obstacles and dangers.

Strangers: Blind dogs can be easily startled by touch, especially from strangers and children. Even familiar family members can startle a blind dog so it's important for people to announce themselves and perhaps introduce a verbal cue for physical touch. Labelled leads and harnesses can alert strangers that a dog is blind and hopefully prevent unmanaged physical interactions.

Merchandise:

There are many products on the market designed to help blind dogs, ranging from harnesses with plastic hoops, collars with plastic 'feelers' and visors. I have been asked to trial many of these items and never found any significant benefit. They are very difficult for a dog to get used to and many prevent the dog from developing their own adaptive mechanisms.

Other impairments:

Older dogs with other health issues can find losing sight much more difficult, especially if their sense of hearing is also impaired. These dogs may need significantly more support and may not be able to enjoy as full a life as a healthy blind dog.

Support:

There are many resources available to owners of blind dogs, and seeing what other blind dogs can achieve can be a great way of giving an owner confidence that their own dog will still enjoy a happy life as a blind dog.

Rehoming:

There may be some situations and environments that make it impossible for a blind dog to adapt and thrive. Before euthanasia, please encourage owners to consider rehoming, Blind Dog Rescue UK is the only charity in the UK dedicated to the rescue and rehoming of blind dogs in the UK. We have a wealth of experience across all age groups and breeds and offer support to all owners of blind dogs.

My hope in writing this article is to empower veterinary staff to speak confidently and positively to any client with a dog facing blindness. Having personally fostered over 25 blind dogs and rehomed over 500 blind or partially sighted dogs, I truly speak from experience when I say that blind dogs are exceptional. They adapt incredibly quickly and only need to be given a chance and the support to live active, happy lives.

More information about Blind Dog Rescue UK can be found at www.bdruk.org