

NIGHT ALERTING

As we have discovered with some of our dogs, spontaneously offering a nighttime alert is possible, but that probably would be considered an exception. Most dogs will need some training to reliably perform this alert for this critical time period.

As with much dog training, but especially with alert training, it is important to understand your dog, what we are asking of the dog, and how the dog learns. For this lesson, we are asking the dog to wake himself up and alert the child or someone else in the house to a change in blood sugar. The dog can be trained to provide advance notice so that the child will not fall into a dangerous low glucose level at this very important time—nighttime.

For other training, including day alerting, we train the dog's conscious mind to "sense a scent" and perform a behavior. Here we need to instigate a response that will cause the dog to wake up out of a sleep state because of a scent much like the dog would for a noise, commotion, or bright light.

First of all, for night alerting to be effective, the dog should be sleeping with or by the child. Once you are getting solid, fairly reliable, and quick alerts during the day, you can begin night-alert training (also see "Preparation Training" at end of this lesson).

The best time to start this training is when the dog is ready for a nap and the child is present. It's good to anticipate when the dog may be resting so that you can have a scent source ready to use. While the dog is sleeping, open the scent source that has low samples and wave it past his head/nose. Wait for the dog to wake (not longer than 10 minutes or so) and wait for an indication that the dog received the scent. You may see his nose twitch slightly or the dog may wake and raise his head. Each dog is different, but what you are after is that slight recognition that you have watched for and achieved in early daytime alert training. When you see that recognition as he wakes and recognizes the scent, praise and treat.

Work to get several repetitions some time apart with the dog dozing off in between. Practice several times a week and work at different times of the day so his brain begins to periodically rouse to sniff for the smell. We need to have the dog to wake in the daytime when he is asleep as well as nighttime. Try to have the child change position so they are seated, reclining, or laying down when the dog alerts.

Initially, some dogs may be unresponsive to the source scent while sleeping and need a more gradual approach. So, try doing this training at different periods—when the dog is just getting sleepy, beginning to nap, or just sleeping lightly during the day. You might have to make a slight noise to get him out of a deep sleep. Then as the dog becomes more responsive to the scent, you can begin training when he is sleeping more soundly.

Now, for alerting when your child may be in a sound sleep and have low blood sugar. As the alerting behavior becomes more solid, you should try to have the child occasionally be unresponsive to the first alert. Let the dog get pushy about waking them up from a fake, deep sleep. He may improvise, beyond a short bark, with the trained alert behavior. This should not be discouraged, because we have heard that we sometimes don't recognize other alerting behaviors, such as pacing, anxiety, pawing, etc. The dog often is working to get attention and we need to ensure that he will wake and alert your child or someone in the house from a deep sleep. For a more realistic situation, have the child take the scent jar to bed early in the evening, hide them under the pillow, and train in the same manner with the dog sleeping nearby.

If the goal is to have the dog alert a parent or other adult in the house, the desired response that has been taught earlier for a daytime alert should be reestablished. Again, a desired response is to sit and woof, which means that the “sit” and “speak” command should already be perfected (see “Response Training14”). To have the dog find a parent/guardian before sitting and woofing as a response while the child is sleeping (or pretend sleeping) with the scent sample under the pillow, just have the adult move farther and farther away from the dog until they have to come to you to get the reward (as described in “Response Training14”).

Preparation Training

Following is some game playing that might be useful for “Night Alert” preparation training:

Playing a specific fun game with your dog can help the dog learn to notice a scent cue even when he is engaged in another activity. First of all, choose a game that your dog enjoys playing (fetching a ball, etc.). Use a toy that you can move around in front of the dog and entice the dog to join in. Play a bit, but then while the dog is distracted, wave your hand with a scent source past the dog quickly and visibly unnoticed while giving the verbal alert cue (such as speak). After you get an alert, go back to playing the game. The

idea is to get in a few good reps that break up the game momentarily for an alert and yet does not stop all the fun completely. Over time, the game should be generalized to other environments with distractions. Once you get solid, quick alerts during interrupted play exercises, you would be ready for night alert training.