

COME! A Recall Training Program

Teaching a dog to come when called (also known as the “recall”) is not as difficult as you may think! It does take time, enthusiasm, and good deal of practice, but the steps are pretty straightforward. If you have time to practice on most days, you can figure it will take six to eight weeks to develop a reliable recall. (Note: This training program assumes you are using clicker style training and that you know how to “fade the lure”.)

Recall Rules for Off Leash Success

It is essential that you follow these “recall rules” for the next six weeks, or until you have completed your basic training program. After completing your initial recall training, you will want to continue following these rules most of the time. This will help keep your dog’s recall strong and reliable for life.

1. Don’t end play by calling your dog to you. Instead, go get your dog or wait until he is ready to come on his own.
2. Always follow a recall with one of your dog’s favorite things—be it food, Frisbee or playing with another dog.
3. Do a few “high value” recalls right away during off leash play—let your dog know that coming to you will be worth his while. Then release your dog to play again.
4. Timing is essential. Times that may be very difficult for dogs to come are when they are in the middle of greeting another dog, the moment they find a great smell, or in the midst of a prey drive chase (after a squirrel for example). At these times, up your odds of success by timing your recall for the moment the dog CAN MOST EASILY DISENGAGE. For example, if your dog is greeting another dog, wait for the moment when they are about to disengage naturally, then call your dog.
5. Avoid repeatedly call your dog when you know he won’t or can’t come. Go get him instead.
6. Never (and this is a golden rule) act or behave in anyway other than your dog is the most wonderful being in the world when he comes to you--no matter what he was doing before he came.

GETTING STARTED

In brief, for your dog to have a reliable recall, you will need to follow these steps:

1. Teach your dog the behavior.
2. Make your dog think coming when called is the best thing that happens in his/her life.
3. Increase distractions gradually.
4. Practice, practice, practice.
5. Continue reinforcing for life.

Think about exactly what you would like the behavior to look like. There isn't a real right or wrong to this, you (and whoever else will be working with the dog) just need to have an exact behavior in mind so that you know what you will be working towards.

Note: Always use the highest value treats when first teaching "come." Try chicken, liver, cheese, jerky, and other smelly, yummy, soft treats. Make "come" practice the highlight of your dog's day.

Step 1: Teaching come

- Pick the word you'd like to use. "Come" is a good choice, but you could use any word. If you have (unsuccessfully) tried to teach "come" before, you may want to change to a different word. "Here," and "close" are alternatives. Some people like "hotdog" or "cookie." The only restriction is that you use something other than the dog's name.
- Start by charging up the word "come". Go into a low stimulation environment where you and the dog can be alone (like the bathroom or bedroom). Say the word "come" like you would when asking your dog to come and then give your dog a treat. Repeat this 20 to 50 times. Repeat the whole exercise (go into a quiet room, say "come" and then give your dog a treat, 20 times in a row) several times over two or three days. You are essentially super charging the word "come".
- You can teach the beginning behavior by using a food lure, shaping or capturing the behavior. I like to use a food lure because it is a fast way to get started. Simply put the treat in front of your dog's nose, as he sniffs it, take several steps backwards. When he follows the treat towards you, click and give it to him. Repeat several times.
- Once your dog will easily follow the treat, add the word "come." You are now putting together the beginning behavior with the super charged word, "come."
- Quickly fade the lure, going to a simple click and treat. Use the lure only if he seems confused or unresponsive. • In the first several session, don't worry about adding the sit and collar touch. This can be added after the dog has the general idea, probably in about your fifth or sixth session.
- Practice this in your living room, bedroom, front yard, backyard, and other low stimulation environments until he seems to have it down pretty well (a 90 percent success rate is a good gauge.)

Your success rate is how many successful or correct responses you get when you ask for the behavior. When you are deciding when to make a behavior more difficult (say by adding distractions), use a 90 percent success rate goal. So, for example, if you get 9 out of 10 correct responses, it's time to make it a tiny bit more difficult. What if your dog is making a lot of mistakes? If you have 2 incorrect responses in a row, it

is time to make the exercise easier for the dog—help him be successful!

Step 2: Make it the best part of his day!

- This can't be said too much. Make recall training the highlight of your dog's day. Use the best treats and toys as rewards. Always keep it fun!
- Write down the things your dog finds rewarding on page 8. If you have trouble coming up with things, start experimenting. See what your dog seems to like best. It is important to have a variety of things you can use for your rewards, so really think this through.
- Use "recall games." Make recall games a regular part of your daily routines. See "Recall Games" on page 7 for more details. • Make recall training part of other fun activities—like ball play, tug games and chase me games. For example, I might play a little tug with my dog; then at a pause in the game, I will back up, say "come"; my dog will come, sit in front of me, and I'll touch her collar; I'll then say, "yes" or "OK" for a release, and the reward will be the continuation of the tug game.

Using games to teach the recall does more than just make the training fun for the dog and handler. It also teaches the dog to "listen" to the word "come" when he is in the middle of something fun and to "call off" of something. Let's face it, the most important time to have our dogs come reliably is often when they are having the most fun—like chasing a squirrel, playing with another dog, about to roll in that great smelling pile of...

Step 3: Increase distractions gradually.

This is possibly the most important step for teaching your dog to come reliably in almost all situations.

- In order to train to increasing distractions, you will need to have thought through what things your dog finds distracting. What a dog finds distracting (or engaging!) varies from dog to dog. A puppy might be engaged by a leaf blowing across a lawn, some dogs are enthralled with balls, some dogs must greet other dogs. Write down everything your dog finds distracting on page 9. Then rank them. Try to figure out what your dog will find least and most distracting.
- Pick at least 10 different locations you can practice in. New places are distracting too.

There is no such thing as a 100% reliable recall. Dogs will always be dogs! What that means is that they are living, thinking, decision-making beings that will always be making choices. No matter how much you train or practice, and no matter how great your dog responds, you will always need to use good judgment when you have your dog off leash. Know your dog, know

what situations will be hardest. Is it chasing birds, visiting with other dogs, or the scary sounds of thunder that make it most difficult for your dog to respond? Know your dog and respect your dog. Don't expect your dog to be someone he is not!

Step 4: Practice, practice, then practice some more!

- A dog becomes “fluent” on a behavior with practice. The more practice (as long as it is fun, and you don't burn the dog out!), the better.
- When practicing “coming” when called, you need to practice in brief, high energy burst, fun sessions—preferably several times a day (but several times a week will work too—it just takes a little longer).
- Set up a schedule for yourself. Write it on a calendar. Track your practice and your progress.

Putting Together Step 3 and Step 4: You will want to practice your recalls with the following schedule or criteria in mind:

- Practice one level of distraction at a time (starting with the easiest and progressing to the most challenging) until your dog is totally proofed at that level. A dog is proofed at a level when he or she will come happily each time he or she is called with that level of distraction.
- Start practicing each level of distraction in the easiest environment (remember that the surrounding environment is also a distraction). For example, practice level one distractions such as a leaf on the ground in your living room. • Once your dog is completely reliable in your living room, go to new environments and practice the same level of distraction.
- Continuously reinforce your dog with high value treats or games until he or she is proficient at the level of distraction.
- Once your dog is proficient at a certain level of distraction, train with reinforcements of different values. Example: Dog comes, throw ball. Dog comes, give chicken. Dog comes, throw ball ten times. Dog comes, give body rub. Dog comes, release to play with other dog. Dog comes, give chicken.

Your schedule might look something like this:

Day 1: Practice in the living room 3x, ten repetitions, with level one distractions. Total success. Move to new environments.

Day 2,3 and 4: Practice level one distractions in at least eight different places over the next three days. When dog is responding without hesitation, go to level two.

Day 5: Practice level two distractions in living room 3x, ten repetitions. When total success is reached, move on to new environments.

Day 6 and 7: Practice level two distractions in various environments. At least eight places and until the dog is responding easily and happily.

Day 8: Continue practicing level two distractions in various environments. Add in one session of level one distractions in living room using differing values of reinforcement (see above).

Day 9: Move to level three distractions in easy environment. Practice 3x.

Day 10, 11, 12: Practice level three distractions in at least eight different environments. Practice level two distractions in living room using different values of reinforcement.

You get the idea. Set this up for you and your schedule. Don't worry if you miss a practice time, just maintain the appropriate level of distractions. If you miss a few training times, just drop back a level to insure success.

Note: Always work for success and be flexible. For example, if you hit a distraction that you think is a level three, but your dog can't handle it yet, maybe it's really a level six or seven. Bump it up on the list. Work your dog to complete success and move the distraction level up only as fast as he or she can handle it. Each dog will work at slightly different rates and each person will train at different rates.

Step 5: Reward for life!

- Continue practicing several times a week at various locations and with various distraction levels for three to six months.
- Integrate your recall practice into your daily life. Play with it on off leash walks. Call your dog to you several times on your walk, then send him back off to play.
- Keep on rewarding your dog for great recalls. Use variable rewards— treats, toys, praise and freedom! Always use great rewards for great recalls.

Recall Games

Turning your recall practice into fun and games helps both you and your dog enjoy the training. Plus, it helps your dog learn to “call off” of fun things!

Back and forth recall game. For this game, you will need another person. Call your dog between the two of you. Each time your dog comes, give a great big happy reward (silly play, jumping up and down, great food treat, play ball, etc.)

Hide and seek. Have your dog stay in one spot. Go into another room and hide. Ask your dog to "COME find me" (emphasize the come). When your dog finds you, give a great big happy reward. Repeat three to ten times (stop while your dog is really engaged). Once your dog knows this game, you can play it unexpectedly... Example: At the beach, hide behind a rock, call, "Come find me." When your dog finds you, get crazy happy.

Dinnertime recalls. Have your dog sit or down and stay while you prepare his dinner. Continue to have your dog stay while you take the dinner into another room. Call your dog to you--dinner is the reward.

"You're the most wonderful dog" recall. Call your dog to you. When your dog comes, get down on the ground and play, play, play for at least three solid minutes.

Ball between the legs. Call your dog to you, as your dog comes running, throw the ball (or a favorite treat) between your legs and call "get it." (Or, if your dog is too big to come between your legs, you can simply turn around and toss the ball.) Remember to say "get it" when your dog goes by so that your dog doesn't start to think the recall means to run past you.