

A Reliable Recall

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People frequently ask me about training a recall, so here is my answer - All of us want a dog that always comes when it is called. Not only is it convenient, it also ensures the dog's safety. Unfortunately, dogs aren't born knowing how to come when called. All dogs can learn to be reliable in their recall, but they must be taught with consistency. First you must have the dog's trust, be the pack leader, and establish a friendship bond strong enough that he will say, "Yes, I will work for you!"

So let's begin. You can actually start when you first take him home. Every time you handle your dog to pet him or feed him, you want him to look at you, especially when you speak his name. You are laying a good foundation for the recall when you do this. When you are in the house with your dog, watch to see that he looks up at you when he hears his name. You are not only ready to begin teaching the recall; you are well on your way!

Let's get started. Remember that your dog does not have to come to you. He can run faster than you, and when he is outside there are many more interesting things to do than looking at you or responding to your call. Let's take a look at the steps involved in teaching a reliable recall. Remember that you must be able to enforce any command, so don't be quick to take off your lead or long line.

1. Make your recall command very special and save it for special occasions. In the beginning, use it only a few times per session, and only when you are prepared to heavily reward him for coming. Reward with treats, verbal praise, rubs, scratches, dinner, car rides, toys - anything your dog LOVES!

2. To set up for success make sure your dog has had a chance to exercise and get the kinks out before you start your training session. A fenced area or a safe area on a long lead is ideal for this. Remember, any time he returns to you REWARD him in any appropriate fashion and then tell him he can go play. When he moves off some distance, use his name to get him to come to you. You can hide from him or run away from him; always make coming to you

fun. Never chase him. Hide and seek is a fun game to play in the house; you hide and call his name. They love the challenge of finding you, and this little exercise can lead to tracking later on. Don't use your special recall command yet, because you can't control the consequences.

3. Now attach a long line to your dog's collar. The size and length of the line will depend on the size and speed of your dog. It can be 15 or 20 feet or longer. You may want to put a few knots near the end of the line so that you can step on it to stop him if necessary. Don't try to pick up the long line with your hands - you can get a rope burn!

4. Call your dog using your special come command. Make sure he is fairly close to you and you are pretty sure he will come. Be ready to reward him when he gets to you. Don't make him wait around while you fumble for the treats.

5. Gradually begin to add distance between you and the dog. Add some mild distractions, making sure that you can control the consequences. If your dog comes to you, cheer him on and encourage him. When he gets to you, praise some more and give him a treat. then release him using your release word. But if he doesn't come on your first command, step on the line and reel him in so that he understands that you are in control. Praise him when he gets to you, then release.

6. Now that you have a good degree of reliability, you can start to increase the level of distractions and the distance between the two of you. If he doesn't come, have a friend step on the line while you go over and play with another dog, or give your treat to another dog. Now your dog realizes that you are the best game in town, and coming to you would have been his best choice!

7. If you have done a good job reinforcing your recall command, it should be difficult to keep your dog from coming to you from any distance. A dog can hear you call in a normal tone of voice at 100 yards, so don't think you have to shout at him. If you find as you increase the distance that the dog is more easily distracted, go back to shorter distances, continue to reward, and admit that you may have tried to move ahead too quickly.

8. Handlers who are the most generous and consistent with their positive reinforcers will be successful faster. Be patient and have fun because if recalls aren't fun for both of you it will be harder to progress.