

Recall Training in Dogs

Why good recall is so important to you and your dog

Recall training is vital to keeping your dog safe and under your control in any off-leash situation: in dog parks, in your yard, around strange people or other dogs, among others. It provides an extra level of safety in the event that your dog escapes your immediate control or finds itself in a potentially dangerous situation.

General tips for success

Training your dog to come when called is a process that is built upon a positive relationship with your dog. While an awareness of your dog's "personality" and breed predisposition play an important role in your approach to training, any dog is capable of learning the recall command.

Positive reinforcement is a vital component of this training protocol. This can be done using food treats (like tiny pieces of cheese or hot dogs) or toys, plus verbal praise combined with positive physical attention.

Before starting recall training, it is helpful to have a couple of training tools under your belt. Your dog should know his or her name and make eye contact with you when you say it. Make sure that you consistently reward this behavior as you are training it. Once your dog can do this reliably in a calm environment, continue this training in increasingly distracting environments such as while on leash at a park.

Getting started:

Consistency and patience are essential to training. Keep in mind that some dogs will learn faster than others, and that training needs to be reinforced and practiced. Having an appropriate enclosed area and someone to assist you will be very helpful. If you do not have easy access to such a space or assistant, you can use a long rope or leash and a tree or other stationary object to simulate being off-leash.

Your assistant should stand with your dog while you walk about 10 feet away. Initially, your assistant should not offer attention or treats. To avoid bribing your dog to come, keep treats out of sight or even out of your hand as you walk away and give the command. When you give the command, your body should be lowered to the ground in an inviting, non-threatening posture. The command "Come" should be given only once, in a clear, but light and happy voice following the dog's name (i.e. "Fido, Come").

If the dog does not *immediately* respond to this command by turning and coming to you, calmly and without punishment or treats, go to the dog and bring him or her back to the place where you gave the command. If your dog does respond to the command, reward the behavior as soon as the dog begins to commit to coming. Stand and give treats or toys and a *lot* of verbal praise when your dog gets to you.

An alternate method is to have the dog stay in a stand or sit, then walk backwards while using the "Come" command. When the dog chases you, reward with treats and verbal praise.

A good goal for the final recall behavior is to have the dog sitting at your feet, and allowing you to touch its collar. If your dog does not do this automatically you can give "Sit" as a second command with a second reward until it becomes associated with the command to "Come".

DO's and DON'T's

In general, you should only practice recall training when you are confident that your dog will respond to you. For example, if your dog is running away from you or is otherwise distracted, do not use the command "Come", because he or she will not associate the correct behavior with the command.

As you build upon your recall training, you can increase the distance between you and your dog, have the person holding the dog distract the dog while you give the command, or practice the command in more distracting environments.

It is *crucial* to never punish the dog for coming, even if he or she is very slow to respond, or has misbehaved prior to coming. In addition to not giving verbal punishment, you should avoid putting the dog back onto its leash directly after giving the command if possible, as this can be viewed as a punishment.

Cautions

Remember that no training is ever 100% effective! This means that you should always take precautions (i.e., keep your dog on a leash) in areas that are especially dangerous, such as near streets and other areas of heavy pedestrian or motor traffic.

Also, it is always crucial to have your dog's health evaluated by a veterinarian prior to any behavioral training in order to ensure that there are no physical or medical obstacles to optimal behavioral training.

Finally, as with any behavioral training, it is important to keep in mind that recall training requires *a lot* of patience, persistence and intermittent reinforcement of good behavior. It may not happen quickly or easily, but following the tips discussed above should put you on the road to having a dog that runs back to you in almost any situation. If you have any questions, please discuss it with your veterinarian.

*Handout created as part of a class exercise by veterinary students:
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