



Good Habits are Hard to Break

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The Recall

Teaching Your Dog to Come Reliably When Called

Many dog owners like to torment themselves with the following scenario, much to the amusement of bystanders: first, having never practiced recall with their dog before, and without even having demonstrated to the dog what “come here” means, they let the dog off leash at the dog park, where she encounters squirrels, rabbits, birds, approximately 6,000,000,000 new smells, and other dogs to play with. Then, they scream “come here” fruitlessly at their dog for the next thirty minutes, while the dog joyfully “ignores” them and jaunts about playing and sniffing. Finally having caught the dog through sheer luck, they yell at her and drag her off to the car and home. Smart bystanders know that this method will guarantee that next time, the dog will be sure not to get caught after a mere thirty minutes.

As this parable demonstrates, most problems with recall come from asking the dog to do too much, too soon – and from punishing the dog instead of rewarding her when she does finally come back to you. Even dogs with very good recall in the back yard will have a very difficult time coming when called at the park, where they have never practiced and there are so many interesting dogs to meet and smells to smell that they simply can’t understand the concept of returning to their owner just yet.

Running around the park and amusing the other dog owners is one thing, but every time the dog is running and not under the control of his owner, he is in danger. He needs to be taught to return to his owner pronto if she calls him.

There are many reasons why the scenario above is so common. One reason is because dogs learn contextually, and the park is a very different context than the home environment where most training sessions take place. Another explanation is that the dog may not associate the word “Come” with the act of returning to his owner. Remember, dogs do not learn words as cues very easily and are most likely responding to context and visual body cues when they follow your requests. It is possible to teach your dog to respond reliably to a verbal request, but it must be done in a specific sequence for the dog to learn. Yet another possibility is that the bar is simply set too high. Perhaps you have practiced coming when called with Fido in your quiet, fenced back yard but nowhere else. A recall in a small, familiar space with little or no distraction is the equivalent of a Kindergarten recall while a recall at a public park or in the woods is the doggy equivalent of a Ph. D. There are many “grades” in between that must be mastered before attempting a doctorate level program. The final most common reason a dog may not return to her owner when called is that it has simply not been rewarded. Worse coming when called may have led to punishment in the past. It does not matter whether this punishment was intentional, such as yelling at your dog for coming too slowly, or unintentional, such as only calling your dog at the end of a play session, clipping on the leash and leaving the park or calling your dog and throwing him right in the bathtub, the result is the same. The dog has learned that coming to you when you call for him generally means bad news for him or at the very least, the end of fun. If your dog does not like to come to you when called it is a sign there is something amiss in your relationship or that your dog does not know what you would like him to do when you call him. The good news is the solution is the same regardless of the reason your dog does not come when called. Systematically teach your dog what you would like him to do and then reward him for doing it.

Training A Recall

It is our responsibility to teach dogs that training and fun are not mutually exclusive. In fact, training should be the most fun that can be had! That way, the dog will want to come when he's called. Dogs also need to learn what we mean by our commands – that way we will not, as in the immortal Farside cartoon, merely be yelling “Blah, blah, blah, Ginger!” at them.

When training recall, keep in mind the following “rules of thumb.” (1) Start small, with something very easy for the dog to do – she needs to have success in order to figure out what you want from her when you utter your request. (2) Reward, reward, reward your dog when she comes to you, with yummy treats, a favorite toy, and lots of praise. You want her to want to come to you, and remember, you're competing with lots of interesting and fun things. (3) Work up very gradually from a very easy recall to harder and harder ones, with more and more distractions. (4) Make sure that you recall your dog many times in a session and then let her go back to the game/walk/activity. This way, she does not associate coming when called with ending the fun. (5) Never, ever, punish the dog when she does come back. If your dog gets to run and play while ignoring a request to come back, but gets punished when she does come back, then she quickly learns the obvious lesson: it's a big mistake to come back to you.

To train recall, first, don't let the dog off leash in a public place until he reliably comes when called in the back yard, from out of sight anywhere in the house, on-leash on walks in the neighborhood, and in class. Begin with something quite easy: say, the back yard or even indoors. Start from fairly close to the dog when he's not terribly distracted and say in a quiet, happy, voice “come here.” Waggle a treat and back up a bit, when he comes to you, praise him and offer the treat. (For some dogs you may have to start quite close and on leash.) Then tell him to “go play” and let him go back to what he was doing for about 30 seconds, and call him over again.

With lots of repetitions of these recall “relays,” the dog begins to learn that coming when called does not necessarily mean that the fun is over – it often means only a treat, a quick pat, and a return to the fun. Once he reliably comes from a short distance, begin to gradually increase the distance, and to work off leash (if he had to be on leash to begin with). Practice this “low impact” recall in various safe places, e.g., a friend's fenced yard, a local tennis court after hours, or different parts of the house.

Now begin to add distractions, like toys near-by sometimes, a good doggy friend around another time. You will have to back up a bit and start recalling from closer to the dog at first when you add distractions to the mix; gradually increase the distance with distractions around until the dog can come from quite a distance away, even with distractions. As soon as the dog comes over when called, she can return to the toys, the new smells, or her friend for a bit, until she's called over again for a treat and some praise – then it's back to the fun. It's best when working with distractions to employ an accomplice. If the dog does not come when she's called with a low, quiet voice the first time, immediately increase the volume to a loud, commanding (not angry) tone and demand “FIFI. Come Here!” When she comes after the second call, praise her and show her the treat but do not give it to her. Instead, back up a few steps and say in your soft voice “Come here.” When she comes over, praise her and give her the treat. This way she learns that, in order to earn the treat, she must come the first time she's called. If she does not come even after hearing the commanding voice the second time, the accomplice should either leash up the other dog and end the play, or remove the treat or toy that was distracting the dog. Thus, the dog is not rewarded (with continued play time) for not responding to your request. She also learns that, if she does come over, the play quickly resumes, but if she doesn't come over, the game ends immediately. Good reason for coming over quickly!

Gradually increase the number of distractions until the biggest distraction of them all can be tackled: the park. Remember to start very small again once this giant play land and smell-scape is presented to the dog for the first (and second, and third) time – begin with the dog on a lead and fairly close. Only once he is reliably returning on leash can he be let off leash, and then, immediately begin to do recall relays before he gets too involved in the fun. Call him over many times, reward and praise him, and release him back to fun and games while touring the park. Out of fifty recalls, then, only one will result in the leash and home – the vast majority will mean reward and back to play. With those odds coming when called is most certainly worth the gamble. Plus coming back to a happy owner with a yummy treat or friendly belly rub, even if it means leaving the park, is not such a bad deal.

Remember that the dog will need to keep practicing these recall relays every time she goes to the park. It's quite easy for you to do, and lots of fun for the dog. Also remember that new territory is always more distracting, so a trip to a new park will mean starting back a step or two at first.

With practice and patience, the dog will reliably return whenever he's called – which could save his life some time and will certainly make life easier for you.

It's Still Not Working

There are two possibilities if the dog doesn't seem to be "getting it" when she's learning recall.

One is that you are moving too far, too fast. Dogs differ in their ability to ignore distractions, and an individual dog may simply need to move more slowly when new distractions or greater distances are introduced.

The other possibility constitutes a behavioral emergency: the dog may be afraid to return to you when called. This is usually because in the past, he's been punished, sometimes severely, when he (finally) returned. If you think this is the case, reprimand yourself for having caused an awful rift in the relationship, and for having taught your dog to stay far away when called. This relationship must be repaired, but it must be done carefully. You should also start very slowly and in safe circumstances, when the dog is not very distracted. Backing slowly away from the dog and speaking softly, sweetly ask the dog to "Come here." Toss treats at every step – this way every step the dog takes toward you is rewarded. It may take a while before the dog gets near enough for you to be able to touch his collar. Once he does get near enough, gently and quickly touch the collar, reward immediately with a treat, and release. Repeat as often as necessary until your dog comes happily when called.