

Reliable Recall

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What command can save your dog's life some day? The come command. If your dog ever gets loose, you want him to come to you reliably. We all know of dogs who run in the opposite direction when called—often with disastrous results. All training is communication. Like us, dogs aren't born knowing English. In addition to our dogs understanding our language and rules, training also strengthens the bond with our dogs.

There are some important rules to remember about the come command: Never call your dog to you for anything negative, or he'll remember and won't come the next time. If you need to correct him, go to him and correct him and redirect him to an acceptable activity. Also, don't do so many repetitions that he gets bored. For example, if you've called him to you and he comes fast, happily, and close even on the fifth time—move on to another exercise. We want to keep him motivated and enjoying the training. We don't want him to start engaging in a behavior that we don't want, such as coming slowly. You can always practice again later. Keep your practices of the command short—a few minutes at most—and try to perform a few sessions a day.

All training should be done on a leash, so that you have control. You always need to be able to follow through on a command and not play a game of chase. Begin your lessons without distractions, adding distractions as your dog becomes more reliable in coming to you. Our goal is for him to come happily, quickly, and right up to us.

Start with your dog on about a six foot leash and let him sniff around. I call this the "dog is in outer space" method. This is more like real life than giving the command from a sit-stay.

Use a matter-of-fact (not harsh) "command voice" and say your dog's name and come ("Spot, come"). Everyone should be consistent that the command is "come" not "come here" or any other phrase. When the dog hears his name, he should turn around and look at you to hear the command. At first, he won't know what "come" means. So you want to make him *want* to come to you.

You can use a small, tasty treat as a lure to show him after giving the command. Then, give it to him as a reward after he reaches you. Don't pull him in—make sure that he is coming freely to you, or he'll fight against the tight leash and not really learn to come on his own.

Make sure that you don't give him the treat until he reaches you and is within a few inches. Don't reach out to him, or he'll stop far away from you. You can

even place your hand gently in his collar (not grabbing) with one hand when he reaches you and give him the treat with your other hand. This will help teach him to stay by you and not tag you like a baseball player tags a base.

When you release him, use a release word like “break” or “release.” Once the dog knows the command, you can slowly phase out the treats, giving them less frequently. In addition to any food rewards, always use happy verbal praise, so that you still positively reinforce your dog’s behavior even as you phase out food rewards.

What if your dog doesn’t come at first? You can repeat the command once. But don’t get in the habit of repeating any command, or your dog will think the command is “come, come, come, come.” Also, remember you have to make coming to you more exciting than all the distractions that are going on around him.

It has to be more of a party coming to you than all of the surrounding distractions. So, use a happy tone: be silly—get his attention! Pat your leg for encouragement, say “wheeee (in a high-pitched voice for attention),” etc. to make him *want* to come to you. After he gets the idea what you want, you can phase out these prompts. You can also move sideways or backwards a couple of steps to make him want to come to you or to come faster (just be careful not to trip). This is useful if your dog ever accidentally gets loose; you want him to come to you—so move away and don’t make it a game of chase in which he runs away from you.

Once he knows the command, start adding distractions. Also, then you can use a longer leash, called a long line, that is 10 or more feet long. You can also use a flexi lead as long as you’re not reeling him in with it. These can be purchased from pet supply stores. When training any command, have the dog perform the command in more than one area or room, so that he’ll understand that he needs to perform the command everywhere—inside and outside.

There are other games you can play with a young puppy a few months old even if he’s not on leash. But, for safety’s sake, do this exercise *only* inside or in a fenced area outside. You can have two people about four feet apart to start, one gently holding the pup’s collar with the pup on the floor. The other calls the pup’s name while the first releases the collar. Praise when the pup reaches you. Then play the game in the other direction.

The “find me” game is another fun exercise—especially for puppies and to help make your dog pay attention to where you are. Have a helper gently hold the pup’s collar while the pup’s on the floor. Then, go hide. Make it easy at first, say, around the corner outside of a room. Enthusiastically call your dog’s name as your helper releases him. Praise when he reaches you.

Another way to have a dog come without even using a command is to use his treat word. You can teach him what “treat” means by showing him a treat, saying the word “treat,” then immediately giving him the treat. Repeat a few times until he understands the connection. Once he knows what “treat” means, say his name and “treat, treat, treat” in a happy way. Praise profusely when he comes. If he doesn’t come, he didn’t disobey a command—he just doesn’t get a treat. This is a useful exercise should you ever need your dog to come to you quickly. But always give him a treat when he comes in this manner, or he won’t be reliable.

Your well-trained dog will be the envy of your friends and a joy to live with.
Happy training!