

Training a Reliable 'Come'

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Get S.M.A.R.T dogs
Delta Behavioral Trainer

'Come' is probably the single most important behaviour your dog will ever learn so it is worth taking the time to train thoroughly each of the several components which make up this exercise.

Step 1: Attention! – or your name means “look at me”

Make sure your dog understands that whenever he hears his name he should look at you. How long your dog looks at you is not really important what we are looking for is an instant response rather than a long one. Start by saying your dog's name whenever he happens to be looking at you. In this way you are “labeling” the behaviour of looking at you with your dog's name. The next step is to call your dog's name and see if he turns to look at you – if he does immediately reward with praise, a treat or a game. If he doesn't use a prompt first such as clapping hands or making a funny noise, when your dog does look immediately say his name and reward. By using a prompt to get your dog's attention instead of repeating his name over and over again, you are avoiding desensitising your dog to his name. Instead, always follow attention to his name with a positive experience.

Note you don't want your dog to 'come' on his name alone but rather to give you his attention because a command or cue will follow. You may want to ask your dog “Rover! Down!” or “Rover Stay” rather than “Come” . Your dog's name should only mean “tune in – I'm about to ask you something ” and not any specific behaviour in itself.

Step 2: “Come” is a position close to you.

Teach your dog that 'come' is the human 'label' or 'name' for a position close to you. Put your hand on your dog's collar, hold him close and in a pleasant but firm manner say “Come” just as you would in the park and follow immediately with a treat. Repeat frequently at different times and in different locations. Never give your dog a treat unless you are holding his collar. This is a safety issue which prevents creating a dog who comes close to you, perhaps grabs a treat but stays just outside the “gotch-ya” zone. There is no point having a dog that comes near but does not allow you to attach a lead or to restrain him in some way. As your dog's training progresses you may find a sit to be leashed sufficient however until that time a ' hold collar then treat' regime is the safest option.

Your dog will soon make an association between this pleasurable position and the word “Come”. When you call “Come!” in the park your dog will understand to move into the 'Come' position you have trained. Do not be tempted to skip this part of teaching a reliable recall. Many people believe dogs automatically know what 'Come' means – they don't. Sometimes dogs come because of an attracting tone of voice or body language but that doesn't mean they understand the cue “Come!”. It has no more special meaning to your dog then the word 'Twelve!' so be sure to take the time to 'paint a picture' of what 'come' is – a position close to you.

Step 3: “Come” on lead

While walking on lead, surprise your dog by suddenly saying his name followed by the cue “Come” and moving quickly away from him. Encourage him to come up close into position, take his collar and reward him. This is a foolproof practice run for your dog as being on lead will prevent your dog from choosing to ignore you. Keep this exercise upbeat and happy – “Come” should never sound like an “or else” command nor should it be a begging plea but rather an invitation for fun/games/ treats/cuddles.



Step 4: Reinforcing "Come!" as the right choice

Your dog will only chose to move into "Come" position if it ALWAYS is a happy place to be. Reward your dog every time he 'checks in' with you with praise and/or treats and games. The best thing your dog can do is to choose to spend time with you. Every time your dog moves back to see you when off lead – acknowledge and reward his attention. If you need to do something your dog perceives as unpleasant such as putting him outside, going to the vets or having a bath – do not call him to you. Simply go to him and put a lead on with as little emotion as possible. Some jobs just have to be done but we don't want to reward a joyful "Come!" with an unpleasant consequence.

NEVER EVER PUNISH your dog for coming to you or for allowing you to go and catch him. In either case from your dog's point of view he is being punished for being caught not for staying away. Next time he'll be a bit faster and a bit craftier. If you have to 'collect' your dog you may not feel like rewarding him but try to stay as neutral as possible and simply put the lead on and get over it – punishment might make you feel better but it will only set your dog's recall training back immeasurably. Understand that your dog's behaviour is telling you that you have not yet trained a reliable recall – so don't get mad get even by employing Step 5 below:

Step 5: Semi-freedom – "Come" on a long line

You can prevent bad habits from developing by attaching a long drag line of approximately 5 meters to your dog when you first take him out to off leash area. PVC rope is ideal as it is light, easy on the hands, waterproof and difficult to tangle. Initially, hold the end of the line and regularly repeat the exercise in Step 3 above. Later you can drop the line to allow your dog even more freedom but you will still be able to regain control quickly by standing on the end of the line if necessary. (Your dog will be surprised at what long arms you have!)

Even though your dog will have a lot more space and freedom coming to you is still not optional as he is attached on the line. This also means that you can be all sweetness and fun while maintaining control. Praise your dog as long as he continues moving toward you but stop the instant he detours or hesitates. If your dog fails to take any notice or to complete the "Come", gather him in on the drag line. You need to take away not only the treat he could have had for coming but also the very great rewards of exploring the environment or playing with other dogs as a 'punishment' for not coming. This type of negative punishment is ideal because it puts you in control of environmental rewards without affecting your relationship in an adverse way.

You may choose to use a light line for many months before you feel confident enough to grant your dog complete freedom . The line may be gradually faded by reducing the length or attaching an even lighter, more discrete line. In any case, practice makes perfect. Give your dog plenty of opportunity to learn what is required – if he does come –make a big fuss, give him a treat then allow him to go play again. Repeat many times – most "comes" should be rewarded with a release to play, only one will have to end with time to go home!

Step 6: You're the best game in town!

Off leash time shouldn't mean that your dog runs around ignoring you. Although it is natural for a dog to engage in some amount of independent exploring and socializing, the best game in town should ideally be the time spent with you. For many dogs interactive games such as fetch are the way to their hearts rather than food treats. A great way to develop a reliable recall with these dogs is to have two toys of equal value to the dog (for example two tennis balls or two kongs on a rope). You throw one in one direction, the dog races to get it then you show him that you have another one and yours is 'alive' (that is your dog's toy is no longer moving whereas yours will come 'alive' when you throw it making it more immediately interesting!) Your dog will have to turn and race back to you if he wants to get the more interesting toy. Be sure to play games on your terms – get your dog to sit or drop before you throw and intersperse play sessions with short settle breaks. Interactive games are a great



way to enhance your relationship with your dog and to help him burn off excess energy in a controlled way.

Another good game, especially with a young dog is Hide and Seek. Most puppies don't like to be all alone so when you are out together quickly sneak behind tree then call your dog. Have a special toy or treat ready for when he finds you. Dogs enjoy using their hearing as well as their sense of smell to seek you out. This game also teaches your dog that it is his responsibility to keep his eyes on YOU.

Handy Hints to a reliable recall.

- Dogs hear better in a higher register so raise your voice higher rather than louder. Sound eager and pleased to see your dog and avoid tones of anger.
- Dogs see and are attracted to movement more than to stationary objects. Moving away from your dog as you call, crouching down low and holding your hands out wide and waving can be more attracting to your dog than standing still when you call.
- Don't call your dog in the middle of a sniff or game with another dog. If you were engrossed in a conversation or TV programme you probably wouldn't hear someone calling you either! Wait for a pause, then use your best and loudest calling voice to attract your dog. Remember, you'll have more success with a cue that sounds inviting rather than threatening.
- Squeaky toys or whistles will often get your dog's attention when your voice may not. Although these are not a 'command' or 'cue', if they prompt your dog to come to you that's great. Just remember these prompts won't stay effective unless the behaviour they prompt (coming to you) is rewarded.
- If all else fails, try lying down, often a dog will be so surprised to see you on the ground he'll come running over to check you out.
- ALWAYS associate coming to you with something good.
- NEVER call your dog when it has been bad or you are angry.

There is no doubt that some dogs are more likely to hang around their owners and come when called than others. Breed and personality differences will make this exercise much easier for some than for others. For a very few individuals, it may be extremely difficult to train out finely-tuned tracking or hunting instincts. For these dogs management such as a long line may be the only answer.

Help! My Dog's Gone Missing!

Sometimes despite one's best intentions and safeguards a dog will land up separated from its' owner. It is a legal requirement for your dog to be microchipped and to be wearing a name tag with your name, address and telephone number. It is also a good idea for there to be an alternate contact number such as your veterinarian, as very often dogs seem to go missing when their owners are away and not easily contactable.

If you want to be really confident, an excellent service is provided by Dog -E-Data. Your dog's photo and history are registered on a database. If your dog goes missing you just activate a 'lost dog-e-alert' and /or call and report your dog as missing. Immediately a Lost Dogalert is sent to all members in the postcode where your dog was reported missing as well as assistance in contacting local vets, councils and pounds in the area.

For more information visit: www.dog-e-data.com.au

