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Teaching your dog to come when called

The chief complaint of many dog owners is that their pooch won't come when they call. The issue with the come command or recall, is that dogs are regularly outsmarting their owners. Here is a real life example. The other evening, I was dropping off a doggy who had joined us for some socialization. Her dad wanted to show me what he had taught her. He placed her in a sit stay and walked out the front door. She stayed put. He called her to come and she galloped over excitedly. He looked at me, pleased with himself. She then took off, racing into the neighbor's garage and then across the street to another neighbor's house. He repeatedly called her to come and she didn't listen. He then asked her if she wanted a treat in a desperate plea to get her to come back. She blew him off and ran down the street to greet an approaching dog who was scared out of its wits at the site of her trotting over. After what seemed like an eternity, she ran back into the house where she was finally corralled.

So what was it this owner did wrong?

First and foremost, the recall needs to be conditioned in a low distraction setting, before turning the dog loose in a neighborhood with all kinds of exciting sights and smells. Secondly, the dog has to *want* to come. If the fun to be had jaunting around the neighborhood is greater than the fun to be had at home, the dog will always choose the neighborhood and will rarely come when called. In this situation, the come was introduced improperly AND the dog wasn't acknowledged on the few times she did actually listen.

When introducing a reliable recall, the first step is to "load" the word. Pick your command word and stick to it. Then, find a reward that your dog goes absolutely crazy for. Don't choose something you THINK he likes - choose something you KNOW he LOVES. Then, take that reward entirely away from him (i.e. Don't ever give it to him) unless you are asking for the come. To "load" the come, stand right in front of the dog with their attention on you, give the command and immediately offer the reward. Repeat many, many times. The dog will quickly learn the "Come" = "Crazy Good Treat". In step #1, we want the dog right in front of us.

The next step in conditioning a reliable recall is to use the command when the dog is right in front of us, but distracted. Keep the dog close, and when he sniffs the ground, say "Come!" and immediately offer the reward. Here, we are looking for the dog to stop sniffing and look at us for the reward. If he does, we know our efforts are paying off.

Next, attach a long leash to your pooch (30ft or 60ft) and let him drag it around your yard. In the beginning, give him your command when he is only a few feet away from you. Reward immediately. If he comes quickly to you, keep up the good work. If he is slow about his approach, you may want to find a higher value reward. You can also take a few quick steps backwards to help drive him towards you.

Slowly increase your distance away from your pooch. If he doesn't come, reel him in on the long lead, praising him excitedly the entire time he is coming to you. Reward every step in the right direction with excited verbal praise and make sure he gets that yummy reward EVERY time he comes when called.

Once he is coming reliably in your yard, you can change contexts. When changing contexts, start slowly. Try teaching your dog inside your house. First, start right in front of him and once he gets the concept, slowly increase your distance just as you did in the yard. Once he is coming reliably when called, you can begin playing recall games. For example, you can hide in your bedroom and call your dog to come, forcing him to search you out to earn his reward!

Once you have your dog coming reliably inside the house and in your yard, you slowly move your dog to new places and new contexts with varying levels of distractions. Remember to ALWAYS reward your dog for coming when called and be prepared with a long lead if he doesn't come. We don't want Fido accidentally running into the street after a squirrel when you are trying to teach him this new command. Praise every step in the right direction and take a few steps backwards to encourage him in the right direction.

A reliable recall is one of the most important commands you can teach your dog. If he accidentally slips your grip, you need a way to safely get him back. Start slow and take your time properly conditioning this valuable tool. If you go slow and always reward a job well done, your dog will be coming reliably in no time.