

Re-tooling your recall

A reliable recall is, perhaps, the most important skill you can teach your dog. It could save her life!

By Brandi Jacques

If your dog can't recall what to do when you call her name, read on. A reliable recall is, perhaps, the most important skill you can teach your dog. It could save her life! While some dogs are more innately likely to come when you call, all dogs can learn to do it. Like any other behavior, a reliable recall is the result of thoughtful, consistent training. You can do it! Here's how:

Practice makes perfect

No matter who you ask or what you read, a truly reliable recall always seems to come down to the same three points: practice, practice, practice. There is no substitute. Find a way to incorporate recall training into your daily routine. It doesn't have to take long. In fact, short, high-energy sessions are better for your dog and more likely to yield the results you're looking for.

Decisions, decisions

The first step in training any skill is determining what you want the behavior to look like when it is fully trained. What do you expect from your dog when you give your recall command? What responses are acceptable to you? What command are you going to use? How can you divide the desired end-behavior into small, easily trainable chunks? Decide and then be consistent.



Photography by Craig Lizotte

The name game

I like to use my dog's name to mean "look at me." It's an attention-getter and I expect an instant head-jerk when I utter that magic word. To achieve this, I start by giving my dog a treat as I say her name. I quickly progress to saying her name first and then immediately giving a cookie. Once I'm sure that my dog knows her name, I practice this game in all kinds of situations and environments. I wait until she's not looking and then it's "name-head turn-treat." Some trainers recommend a little "tweak" (gentle pinch) on the dog's butt immediately after the name call, just to get the dog's attention. Once I have my dog's attention, I have unlimited options. I may give my recall command, or I may give any other command. This "check-in" name response is very useful if you have multiple dogs: Soshi, down! Zona, sit! Brix, come!

Come hither

The classic recall command, "come!" will work just fine, or you can choose any other word you like. Whatever word you choose, the recall command means, "get your butt over here immediately!" When I give my recall command, I expect my dog to drive toward me as fast as caninely possible.

The first step is to teach your dog what the recall word means. After all, we don't expect little Fido to "roll over" on command without lots of training. Why do we automatically expect that dogs understand the meaning of the word "come"? Like any other skill, a recall is best learned through many successful repetitions met with unspeakably wonderful rewards.

Set up for success

Start in an environment that is as distraction-free as possible. Make sure you have amazing rewards at hand. Work with your puppy on-leash to prevent mistakes. Move backwards away from your dog, making enticing movements and sounds. When your pup begins to run toward you, call "come!" in a loud, clear, happy-sounding voice. When she catches you, reward her lavishly. Many repetitions will help to solidify the meaning of the command for your puppy. Remember, give the command once only (while your dog is moving toward you), using a pleasant tone of voice. Be sure to reward for the correct response.

Restrained recall

This is a terrific exercise for building enthusiasm and drive into your recall. You

Recall do's and don'ts

Do set up daily exercises to teach and practice successful recalls.

Do work to gradually increase the level of distraction.

Do reward lavishly.

Don't call your dog to you to administer something unpleasant (like nail clipping).

Don't punish your dog when she comes to you, no matter how upset you may be.

Don't call your dog when you know she won't come. Just go get her.

Don't call your dog over and over and over.

Don't chase your dog.

Don't use cookies or toys to bribe your dog to come. Cookies/toys are rewards only.

will need to enlist the help of a training partner. Ask your assistant to hold your dog's collar or shoulders and instruct him not to release the dog until you say the word "come!" (or whatever recall command you have chosen).

Now, show your dog that you have something she r-e-a-l-l-y wants: a toy, a piece of last night's roast beef, a handful of cheese, or whatever you think will really excite your dog. Tease your poor dog mercilessly, but don't let her get the goodies. Then run away, acting excited and maybe even a bit crazy. Then give your recall command in a loud but happy voice. Assuming that the level of distraction is low and the dog is motivated by the goodies you are holding, your dog will probably run wildly toward you when your partner releases her. Reward this!

Quit while you're ahead

Do several repetitions, and then stop while your dog is still enthusiastic about the game. Always leave her wanting more. In subsequent sessions, you can begin to vary elements of the game. For example, you might run away excitedly but then turn and stand still as you give your recall command. You might give the recall command and make your dog chase you for a few steps before giving the reward. As your dog gets the hang of it, you can do recalls without showing your dog the reward (but remember to deliver a play session or a handful of treats when your dog complies with your command).

Road show

Once your dog understands the meaning of the recall command and has a history of correct responses in distraction-free envi-

ronments, it's time to take the show on the road. Choose other environments in which to practice recall games. Look for very low-distraction areas for your first few outings. Be sure you have your dog on a leash or a long line to prevent mistakes. Practice in safe places: away from traffic, other dogs and things on which the leash might get caught.

Leave it alone

In addition to teaching the recall command and the desired response, it is wise to develop your dog's ability to work in the presence of distractions. After all, why do our canine companions tend to ignore us when we call? Because they are engaged with something else, like playing with another dog, eating something yummy, rolling in something delightfully stinky, or... worse!

One solution is to teach your dog an "off" or "leave it" cue. This is easy to do. Begin by holding a piece of food in your hand. If your dog tries to get it, close your hand. As soon as the dog gives up and moves back from your hand, open your hand and feed her the treat. After a few correct responses, you can add the cue "off" or "leave it" if you wish. Keep increasing the difficulty of the exercise until you can hold out a handful of goodies in your open palm and your puppy can stay away. Then you can either deliver a reward or release your dog to "take it." This will take lots of practice and eventually you must work up to more difficult distractions. As your dog gains an understanding of the cue, you can apply the "off" command to food or objects on the ground, toys, other dogs, or whatever else you want your dog to leave alone. If



Tips for managing off-leash play

- choose a safe area
- ensure that the other dogs are friendly
- use play as a reward for a behavior you request (e.g., “sit”)
- recall your dog out of play frequently and reward by releasing to more play
- teach your dog that the leash is good by rewarding her when you clip it on
- teach your dog that not having a leash on is no big deal. Unclip the leash calmly and ask for a couple of behaviors before releasing to her off-leash play.

your dog can disengage from distractions on cue, she will be more likely to respond to your recall command.

Resisting temptation

In conjunction with the “off” or “leave it” skill, I teach Susan Garrett’s “It’s Yer Choice” game (in the May/June 2007 and July/August 2007 issues of *DogSport*). The principle is similar, but with one very important difference: there is no “off” command given. Through carefully controlled exercises, the dog chooses to resist temptation, because she knows a better reward is in store for her. Imagine recalling your dog across a field littered with goose poop or trash from a nearby fast-food joint. Wouldn’t it be nice to just call out “come!” and have your dog rocket toward you without stopping to check out each interesting distraction along the way?

Change it up

Your dog’s recall will improve dramatically if you work at it consistently. Practice, practice, practice! Be patient and work up to more difficult distractions very gradually. Once your dog is recalling reliably, you will need to vary your reinforcement schedule: sometimes she gets rewarded immediately, sometimes she must perform several other behaviors before being rewarded and sometimes her only reward is permission to go back to what she was doing.

Under control

If you are hoping to teach a reliable recall, it is important that you control your dog’s access to reinforcement. Work on leash. Prevent mistakes. Until your dog’s response is rock-solid and has been proofed against many distractions, it is unwise to let your dog play off leash in distracting environments. Of course, dogs need exercise and they need to play and socialize with other dogs. However, during your recall-training phase, it is best to limit your dog’s off-leash playtime. Exercise your dog in a fenced area, on a long line, if possible. Avoid calling your dog if you aren’t sure she’ll respond correctly. You don’t want to give your dog the opportunity to ignore your recall command.

Play in the fray

One of the most common challenges for dog owners is the recall out of play. Dogs love to play with other dogs. It is very reinforcing for them. If you expect your dog to come away from play when called, you will need to build up a huge history of amazing rewards for successful recalls around distractions.

Before you unleash your dog into the free-play fray, make sure you’ve done your recall homework. If possible, set up some preliminary exercises with fellow dog owners. I love the exercise taught in puppy classes: ask your dog for a sit and then as a reward, release her to play with another dog (on leash). The two dogs get a very short, carefully managed play session and

then both owners recall their dogs and reward generously. The game works well in the puppy class. But beware: you will need to practice this skill in many other environments and with dozens of other dogs before you can trust your dog to come willingly out of off-leash play.

Troubleshooting

If your dog has a history of ignoring your recall command, it may be best to re-teach the skill from the beginning, using a different word. Since my dog, Soshi, had a history of ignoring the “come” cue, I re-trained her recall using the word “front.” (You can use any word you like.) Soshi associates the new command with really great things, and there is no history of failure. The difference in her response is astonishing.

Change reluctant to reliable

If your dog’s recall is less than reliable, don’t delay — start training today. A really reliable recall is an essential skill, and a behavior that can be trained, like any other. It takes patience, planning and perseverance. Oh, and practice, practice, practice! **DS**

Dr. Brandi Jacques has been competing in agility since 2002 with her shiba inu, Soshi. Together they have placed in AAC National Championship classes for the past three years, finishing sixth overall in 2004 and 2006. They were named to the World Team in 2006 and have appeared on *Top Dogs*, *Breakfast Television*, *City TV*, *Pet Network* and the *CBC*.