

Getting Your Dog To Come When Called

By Joann M. Locher

Pet owners agree that a most maddening, frustrating experience is being ignored when calling the dog. It's also embarrassing, and can even result in loss of the dog.

People who tell me that their dog will not come, when called, also admit that the dog will come when they say "Want a cookie?" or "Want to go for a ride/walk?"

This suggests a major factor involved in getting the dog to respond: What is the motivation for the dog to obey? Training requires either a positive: "What's in it for me if I do?" and/or a negative: "I will be sorry if I don't!"

"Come!" is the most relational of all commands. A reliable response is the direct result of a good owner/dog relationship. The bond of love between dog and owner must be strong, and the owner must also be a respected leader and authority figure to the dog. Owners who, on a day-to-day basis, repeat commands without effectively enforcing them have taught the dog that a reliable, prompt response is not necessary.

The first step in teaching "come" is to make sure that the dog understands what the command means. Unfortunately, a lot of owners say "Come!" to their new puppy when he is running away. This is comparable to saying "chair" when pointing to a table, while trying to teach someone English. It creates confusion for the puppy, and the owner suspects that his dog is stupid

or spiteful.

The way to put a behavior on cue is to form a clear association, in the dog's mind, between the command and its meaning. First, lure the puppy by making sounds, running away, bending, or showing that you have a toy or a treat. As the puppy trots towards you, say "come" in an encouraging tone (pairing the command with the desired activity), then reward his correct response. Praise and petting are effective rewards; unfortunately, however, puppies can be very materialistic, and a special treat or a favorite toy will probably be more effective.

As the puppy comes close, hold the "motivator" in front of you at the level of puppy's nose in both hands (to create a clear focal point or target). It may be necessary to hide the treat in your hands, so puppy cannot grab it. As puppy arrives, slowly raise the motivator up, close to the body, luring the puppy to look up. Since his body is built like a see-saw, if his head goes up, his rear will go down.

As the puppy sits...reward him instantly so that he will not have a chance to jump on you or to direct his focus elsewhere. The reward should consist of three things, all happening at the same instant: (1) Give the treat; (2) Gently touch the collar to teach the puppy that your reach is non-threatening (this reduces the tendency of the puppy

bolting away when you reach for his collar); (3) Say, "Good dog!" in a soft, high pitched tone.

Coming when called can be made into a game. One game is running from the dog, encouraging him to chase and saying, "Come!" Then reward when he catches up. Another game involves spacing two or more people, who then take turns calling the dog. The dog runs from person to person getting a reward each time. Play hide and seek by hiding from the dog and continue to call him. When he finds you, reward exuberantly. Or, have someone restrain the dog by his collar while you enthusiastically call him. The helper should let him go only after he has struggled for a while to get to you. These last two games use barrier frustration to increase the dog's desire to come.

It is crucial for the dog to learn that "Come!" means "I have something nice for you!" NOT that "I am going to grab you/lock you up/punish you for making a mess/cut your nails", etc. Always ask, before you call your puppy, "Is he going to like what I am going to do/give to him??" If not, do not call him!! Quietly, calmly go and get him. Never grab at the puppy! It destroys trust and teaches him to always remain beyond arm's length.

If mistakes have been made and trust has been destroyed, how can it be restored? Attach a control cord to the dog's collar. This is a

light cord, 4 to 10 feet long, which trails behind him when the owner is with him. Before calling the dog, quietly pick up the end of the cord (which has an endknot rather than a handle that could catch on things). Then call the dog, and if he does not immediately respond, he can be promptly reeled in and rewarded. Again, do not call the dog for something unpleasant...just quietly, slowly get him.

One of the most profound axioms, which I often repeat in my classes, is, "IF IT DOESN'T WORK...DON'T DO IT!!" If you think that, when your dog is running loose, he may not come when called, do not call him! If the dog has learned that the word "Come!" is bad news, switch to a new word (which will mean only good news), such as "Here!" or "Front!"

By not responding, he will learn that he does have a choice and that there is nothing you can do about. The only thing you will perfect are your chasing or begging skills. In this case, trick the dog into coming by hiding, lying on the ground as if injured, getting a phantom lunch out to share, running from the dog as if playing without him, or say, "Let's go for a ride." Then, when the dog is safely in your hands, make him very glad that he is back (even though you may want to kill him for running off) and **DO NOT LET IT HAPPEN AGAIN!**

For the adult dog who knows "come", but is intentionally defiant because he has learned that running free is a ball, a more punitive approach may be necessary. Either let the dog out the door or off the leash

with a light cord which is 20 to 50 feet long. If the dog does not realize that the cord is there and bolts, call him in a loud, clear voice and brace yourself. He may arrive at the end of the cord with considerable impact. When he finally comes, give a big reward. Next time, the dog should come on command.

Gorilla warfare is also helpful. Go to a fenced area and have friends hide nearby. Then let the dog loose—and continue calling him until he comes. If he does not come, your helpers should throw bean bags or tosschains (depending upon the size and sensitivity of the dog) at the dog. The area should be a threatening mine field with the owner as the friendly safety zone waiting with a reward.

If your dog has shown that he is too young, or irresponsible, or has too much of a sense of humor (at your expense) to be trusted, do not give him the freedom to ignore you. Retraining a runaway dog often takes several months of rewarding "come", correcting if he doesn't and proper restrictions, before reliability is attained.