

Recall

We've all seen that person in the park yelling at their dog to come back, but have you ever thought what that experience is like through their dog's eyes? If I were that dog I'd much rather sniff that tree or roll in something smelly than come back to my angry owner. Frustration and yelling seems to come so naturally to us when our dog doesn't listen. It doesn't however, do anything to entice our dogs back to us.

Why recall is so challenging to train

Your dog's recall is arguably the most important command you can teach, but it can also be one of the hardest commands to get reliably. We set ourselves up for failure. By trying to be more interesting to our dog what has got your dog's attention and then punishing them when they come back.

Chasing squirrels, for example, is highly rewarding to your dog, especially if they have a high prey drive. When you're chasing after your dog yelling 'come here!' in a negative tone, it's no wonder they're going to continue to chase rather than come back to you - the angry yelling owner.

They will continue to chase and disobey if their distraction is more rewarding than what you have to offer.

In order to get our dogs to come when called we need to make ourselves someone that's consistently more enjoyable to our dogs; someone who's always worth running back to.

You might not get 100% reliability – but you can get close

It's very difficult to achieve 100% reliability. Not all dogs are as naturally willing to please and some are more motivated to roam than others. Recall can be for certain dogs to master – it goes against their natural instinct to sniff, explore or chase. Even the best trained dogs will find certain distractions more rewarding than their owners.

The more you practice using positive reinforcement and consistency the more reliable your dog's recall will be. When your dog makes the right choice and come back to you, make it worth their while with a high value treat or game.

If your dog keeps receiving great benefits for obeying the 'come here' command, they're much more likely to make that same rewarding choice in the future.

No matter how well you think your dog is trained there are certain situations when your dog will take off. Some dogs will find chasing a rabbit irresistible, while some may take off after a motorcycle has scared them. If your dog always comes when called that's great but it doesn't mean it's ok to walk him down the road without a lead.

1. Use one command only for recall

Your dog's recall depends on your consistency. If you want your dog to reliably come when called you need to stay consistent. The command you use to tell your dog to 'come here' must **only** be associated with positive things. Every time they come back to you let them know that they made the best choice possible by rewarding them with a fun game or tasty treat.

This is by far the biggest challenge; it's so natural to say 'come here' any time you want the dog's attention.

Make sure you give them a decent reward when they come to you – they'll begin to associate the 'come here' command with good things.

If you use 'come here' for negative things like getting in the bath or having their nails trimmed, they're less likely to obey the command when it's been associated with things they don't like. The term needs to be associated with **great things!**

2. Take baby steps when training recall

A good recall from your dog doesn't happen overnight – a reliable recall is taught in small steps. You'll want to start with small distances on a lead until you achieve a good recall. When your dog is reliably coming when called, increase the distance. Eventually you'll be able to add in distractions such as people and other dogs. If you find your dog not obeying with certain distractions or further distances, go back a step and practice more – your dog wasn't quite ready to move on.

Like many great things a reliable recall is built over time, don't expect success overnight. If your dog won't come to you in your garden or back yard, they're not ready to try the command in the park.

If you do find your dog has stopped listening, go and retrieve them, don't yell or make it stressful, just lead them away from the distraction. Your dog needs to realise that not coming when called isn't an option, without any harsh repercussions.

If your dog isn't listening then it's time to stop training. The dog is either too distracted, bored with the training or simply not ready for that level yet.

3. Be consistent with your recall command

Dogs are constantly learning from us whether we realise it or not. Don't slack off when it comes to giving a great reward when they come on command. Even if they already know what 'come here' means it's important to keep rewarding them each and every time they do it. If you don't reward your dog they might decide that sniffing around is far more rewarding than coming to you.

Dogs learn well when they're rewarded for their choices; when your dog recalls on command, let them know it's the best decision they could have made. If you forget to reward them they might wonder if they've done something wrong or simply decide it's just not worth their while next time.

4. Make it extra rewarding when your dog comes back

There are so many ways to reward your dog for a good recall, it doesn't just have to be treats. Dogs can be highly motivated by play, so try a tug toy or a lure if your dog likes to chase. If they go crazy for squeaky toys, try those. Anything is worth a try from frisbees to carrots!

Puppy in the middle is a very effective recall game; you and a partner call your dog back and forth. Keep them interested by rewarding them handsomely with a treat when they come. You can step it up a notch by adding a tennis ball and encourage them to join in. It's an easy way to practice a reliable recall with multiple members of the family.

The **chase me** game is another fun way to play with your dog when it returns. As they're heading back to you, verbally praise them and try to coax them in to chasing you. Running with a lure (fluffy squeaky toys) also works well.

5. Start rewarding your dog before they reach you

Whether you're using a clicker or verbal praise, let your dog know it's on the right track while they're heading back to you. If you wait to show any sign of positive reinforcement until they're completely back they might get distracted on the way. It also doesn't do any harm to meet your dog half way if it's on its way to you.

6. Change the reward to keep it interesting

Your dog's recall command is challenging to teach, the stakes are high so the reinforcement needs to be exciting. Keep the rewards for your dog interesting by changing them. Use treats, toys and games. There's going to be an extra level of enthusiasm and excitement from your dog if you keep things mixed up a little. Toys that you designate as tools for training the recall should be kept separate and out of reach from your dog. Dogs can easily become bored if they're given access to the same ones all the time. Only use the high value training toys or treats when you're actually training.

7. Make the release its own reward

If your dog was in the middle of doing something fun before you had it come to you, give them a reward then let them go back to what they were doing. For this to work you need to have a release command such as 'OK, go'. Something to signify the dog is free to go back to whatever they fancy.

Chances are if you're somewhere exciting, going back to playing is going to be more rewarding than what you had on offer anyway. They'll associate the freedom of the release as a positive consequence.

8. Don't punish your dog when they fail

When your dog returns to you after they have been naughty it's pretty hard to stay calm and relaxed. If you give in to anger and scold your dog they will associate coming back to you with negative consequences. Dogs that have negative consequences can get stressed and this can lead to behavioural problems like aggression or fearfulness.