

Come When Called – Recall



Your dog's quality of life and your enjoyment of your dog will be greatly enhanced if he is reliable off lead. I consider "reliable off lead" to be:

1. Your dog will promptly (within three seconds) respond to your command to COME (or his name) on at least nine out of ten occasions.
2. Your dog will promptly (within three seconds) respond to your command to either SIT or DROP at a distance of up to 50 metres on at least nine out of ten occasions.

If you have a puppy aged between eight weeks and five months, please read this now and take action!

Baby puppies will instinctively keep close to family members when on unfamiliar territory - use this to your advantage. Train your puppy to come when called at this early age when he wants to anyway.

Take the puppy to safe, but unfamiliar places, without other dogs around, such as a park, a fire-trail, a friend's large backyard, a paddock, etc. Remove the lead and then walk away from the puppy without paying any attention to him. He will want to follow, not get left behind, in this unfamiliar and potentially dangerous place. You will be conditioning your puppy to watch and follow you.

As the puppy becomes a little confident and is no longer watching your every move, hide behind a tree, rock, building, etc. When he looks up for you again and cannot see you, he will likely have a little panic. If he runs in the opposite direction, call out his name but do not reveal yourself. Allow the puppy to find you and praise and play with him when he does.

I recommend that this type of training be commenced once the puppy has had a chance to bond to his new family members (at least a week) and preferably from ten weeks of age onwards. As puppies mature into adolescents the technique will begin to lose its effectiveness (there is a great deal of variability from one pup to another). The first time it fails, do not attempt any repeats of the exercise until you are confident in the dog's training to come when called reliably.

Allowing the puppy to ignore you when you hide or when you call him will undermine your training efforts to date; your puppy gain reward from the environment (other dogs, people, scents, etc) for not responding.

Training Your Dog to Come When Called

• Describe the behaviour you expect from your dog when you call COME:

When I call my dog to COME, I want him to immediately (within three seconds) turn to face me and move directly towards me. On arrival, I want him to sit toe-to-toe with me and give me his attention. He must hold the sitting position and attention until I say the release cue, FREE.

• What associations will your dog form to the command COME?

1. The dog will learn the physical action that follows the command COME as outlined above.
2. The dog will be thrilled to hear the command and respond as outlined above; it is Christmas and Disneyland rolled into one for him. A strong emotional association. Yippee!

Step 1

1. Find a quiet, distraction-free environment to begin the exercise. At home in a well-familiarised backyard or lounge-room is most appropriate. This location will be used for the first six steps of the Recall training programme.
2. Ensure the puppy or dog wants the food treat you have on offer for training. If the dog doesn't want it, it's not a reward! Back to the drawing board!
3. Check that the dog or puppy will reliably sit on command. Do not proceed until they can.
4. With the dog on lead, hold a tasty treat to his nose.
5. Say COME in a clear enthusiastic voice. Remember you will later want the dog to recognise this command at great distances and amongst distractions.

6. Move backwards – slowly if the dog is hesitant to move at first or as quickly as the dog or puppy will move with you. There is a great variability in initial responses.
7. As you are moving backwards with the puppy following, “throw a party” with your voice. Get very excited; your excitement will be contagious to the puppy or dog.
8. The first couple of repetitions should not be any further than three metres (10ft).
9. Come to a stop and manoeuvre (you can say SIT too) the dog or puppy into a sitting position. Say GOOD and give the reward to the dog whilst he maintains the sitting position. Keep the dog's focus on further treats, rewarding for maintaining the sitting position, before giving the release cue, FREE.
10. Insist the dog or puppy leaves the position on the release cue FREE.
11. Repetitions will strengthen the association. Early training will be significantly enhanced by using the lead to block any attempts at incorrect response, such as sniffing the ground or moving towards some other distraction.

You will only need to repeat Step 1 approximately three to five times before moving onto Step 2.

Step 2

Create a scenario where the dog desperately wants to come to you:

1. Opposition reflex: a helper restrains the dog or puppy by his lead or collar, pulling him away from you. Of course, this results in the dog pulling towards you.
2. Tease the dog with highly desirable food treats whilst your helper is restraining him.
3. Without having given him any of the “tease” food, turn your back on the dog and run away or a distance of between five to ten metres. Then turn and face the dog or puppy and call COME. The helper immediately releases his grip on the collar or lead.
4. Remember to throw a party with your voice, after you have called COME. Keep it exciting!
5. Ensure the dog or puppy sits before being rewarded. Deliver additional rewards for holding position.
6. Use the lead or collar to block the dog or puppy from breaking position until released, FREE.

Repeat Step 2 approximately three to five times successfully before progressing to Step 3.

Step 3

1. Set-up as you would for Step 2.
2. When you run away from the dog or puppy, turn to face him and count in your head between three to ten seconds before calling COME.

3. Remember to throw a party with your voice after you have called COME. Keep it exciting.
4. Ensure the dog or puppy sits before being rewarded. Deliver additional rewards for holding position.
5. Use the lead or collar to block the dog or puppy from breaking position until released, FREE.

Five to ten successful repetitions of Step 3 will have your dog or puppy believing that COME is a magical word that gives him what he most desires at that point in time. You will be literally observing the “Christmas and Disneyland” effect developing.

Step 4

1. Set-up as you would for Steps 2 and 3 except you will no longer tease with the food before leaving. The food treats should now be in a treat pouch or pocket and your hands empty.
2. Gradually increase the distance you run away before calling COME.
3. Remember to throw a party with your voice after you have called COME. Keep it exciting!
4. Ensure the dog or puppy sits before being rewarded.
5. Intersperse with variable pauses (three to 30 seconds).

Repeat Step 4 five to ten times successfully before progressing to Step 5.

You can also start to reduce how much party you throw with your voice, by pausing briefly between bouts of excitable jibber jabber.

Step 5

1. Set-up as in Step 4 (no food tease).
2. This time you will run away out of sight from the dog or puppy. Depending on the size of your dog and your training location, it could be behind the kitchen bench; into another room, behind the corner of the shed, whatever.
3. Vary the situation.
4. You know the drill!

Really start to reduce the party with your voice. Praise or whoop excitably on a variable basis. That is, sometimes you party, other times you're silent.

Step 6

Increase the challenge! Really make it a game.

1. Hide behind the couch, behind a door, under a bed, in a wardrobe, behind the shed, in the bushes, etc.
2. Call COME; stay silent.
3. When he finds you, reward with excitable play such as belly rubs or rolling around the floor with him, or a tug or retrieve game (with a toy).

Are you both ready to proceed to the next step?

We're going to take the Recall Exercise on the road. Let's make certain we're ready!

Does your dog genuinely demonstrate an emotional response to COME of Christmas and Disneyland rolled into one? Highly excitable, cannot get there quick enough? It would have taken at least two weeks of regular training sessions at home, of Steps 1 – 6, to reach this point.

If your dog is not responding brilliantly to your command COME at home in a quiet and distraction-free environment; it's not going to happen elsewhere. Revise your training and seek further advice if necessary.

Step 7

Hopefully, the COME command is so strongly associated with enjoyment (or Christmas and Disneyland rolled into one), that your dog won't even hesitate to respond joyfully to the command even though there are now competing distractions.

This step varies slightly for puppies of five months of age or under than to that of adolescent and adult dogs over five months of age.

Puppy Progression (five mths old or less)	Adult or Adolescent Dog Progression
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Find a mildly distracting training environment such as a park with little or no dog traffic.2. Ensure the puppy is comfortable in this new environment. If he is stressing, you will need to address this issue first. Do not attempt any training. Seek advice if necessary.3. Ensure you are using a highly valued reward initially.4. Practice steps 2 – 6, increasing difficulty or challenge only if the puppy is confident to do so.5. Should the puppy fail to respond promptly (within three seconds), see Step 7 for adult and adolescent dogs regarding using a long-line.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Acquire a long-line. It could be a long dog lead; a horse lunge-lead; a retractable lead; or a 5 – 10 metre length of cord or rope attached to the dog's collar. The adolescent or adult dog has a greater chance of ignoring commands in favour of exploring a new and stimulating environment. The competing distractions are huge. If the dog fails to respond correctly when you call COME, you can apply a 'prompt' or tug on the long-line and then run backwards, quickly feeding the long-line back through your hands and once again throwing a party with your voice to convince the dog that it <i>is</i> Christmas and Disneyland rolled into one.2. Proceed as for puppy Step 7.

Step 8

Set-up further situations for your dog's learning experience. Particularly consider situations in which it is important for the dog to come when called and situations where it is difficult for the dog to come when called.



Example: an open front door or gate.

1. Attach a long-line to the dog's collar.
2. Allow the dog to escape out of the door or gate.
3. Call COME.
4. If the dog responds correctly, pay him a highly valued reward.
5. If the dog fails to respond correctly, use the lead to block his further progression and move backwards, drawing the line in as you go. Get happy of voice to try to convince him that it is still Christmas and Disneyland rolled into one.

To maintain the Xmas/Disney effect, ensure that the majority of recalls continue to be easy for the dog. If every time (or most times) you call COME it is to take the dog away from something he is enjoying such as playing with other dogs at the park or running free, the command will not hold its appeal for long.

Another thing in regard to puppies and adolescents

Understand that it is incredibly difficult for puppies and adolescents to cease appeasing other dogs and people in order to come when called. For many of these dogs, every fibre in their being is driving them to seek acknowledgement and acceptance from other social beings.

There is a risk in this situation that a pup or adolescent who is feeling uncomfortable and conflicted may then form an association between his unpleasant state of emotions and interacting with other dogs or people.

To avoid this problem developing, ask other people to join you in training your dog to sit and focus for food treats, until released with FREE. Throw in the occasional COME, away from the person, and the dog is more able to cope with the situation.

In the case of other dogs, join in the social interaction with the other dog, praising it and petting it. Now coming away from the other dog is less difficult for your pup or adolescent.

The Ongoing Rules – Three Good Principles

Once we have established a strong understanding in the dog's mind, of the recall command, COME, there are three main principles we need to observe whilst progressing the exercise:

Motivation

We have worked hard to establish the Christmas and Disneyland effect. Now we need to maintain it. Never scold or be gruff with the dog for failures. COME is always joyful! However, do reassess your training program. Ask yourself why the dog preferred an alternative to coming when he was called. Have you gotten boring or militant with the exercise? How long since he has received a high value reward for coming? Have you had to prompt or tug on the long-line too often? Have you been maintaining easy-peasy fun recalls at home?

Assess the value of the various rewards that you are using and list them in order of your dog's preference. Keep in mind that the comparative value of each type of reward ie food or game will alter depending on the dog's current level of hunger or energy.

Use lower value rewards such as praise and a pat for easy recalls. As the degree of difficulty increases, so too should the value and/or volume of the reward.

COME cannot be ignored... ever!

You need to be in a position of control so that you can block any attempts at incorrect responses, such as distractions; completely ignoring your command; or failing to sit on arrival. Keep your dog on lead during the early training of this exercise so that you have the ability to follow through on every command you issue. In the early stages of training, do not call your dog to COME when he

is running free with other dogs or some other equally distracting situation - the dog will probably not respond correctly and you will be allowing your dog to learn that commands are optional when off lead.

If your dog ignores your command to come, use the lead to prompt him; then move backwards away from the dog and praise most excitably as he moves towards you. Praise and or treat when the dog sits in front and then release him back to the game/distraction. The dog will learn that the command is simply an interruption to get a treat – an interruption that cannot be ignored.

COME does not end the dog's good-times

Many owners only ever call their dogs to COME when it is time to put the lead on and go home or perhaps when the dog has escaped into the street. Your dog will very quickly learn to avoid you when you are calling the command COME if it is most commonly to return him to the backyard or to end an enjoyable activity. During your jaunts at the park or out in the street, call the dog to COME away from something he is enjoying - you may have to prompt the correct response by use of the lead - praise enthusiastically and release the dog back to the previous enjoyable activity. Repeat numerous times so that your dog learns that he has no choice but to respond to the command, but will probably be allowed back to what he was doing anyway. The command is simply an interruption to his activities, perhaps for a reward, not an end to his enjoyment.

These three principles must be applied throughout the entire training process of the recall exercise, even when you consider that the dog is completely trained.

Three variations of the recall exercise

1. With your dog in the sit or down-stay position, stand at the end of the lead, facing the dog. Call COME in a clear, animated tone of voice. If the dog does not immediately move towards you, use the lead to prompt the action.

Praise your dog as soon as it is moving towards you - this will assist in keeping his attention on you.

Run the lead through your hands as the dog comes to you so that you will be able to use it to assist in achieving the sit or stopping your dog from moving past you. Remain standing upright rather than leaning over your dog.

If your dog performed particularly well i.e. correct response without prompting and with an automatic sit, you may like to follow-up your praise with a tasty treat.

NB. You should only commence this exercise after the STAY command has become very reliable under numerous distractions.

1. With your dog on lead, give the release command, FREE, and encourage the dog to sniff around at the ground or another dog or some other distraction.

Command the dog to COME.

If he responds correctly, praise madly - have him sit in front and follow-up with a reward. Release again to whatever the dog was previously enjoying.

If your dog attempts to ignore the command, use your lead to prompt the dog into the correct response - you may also like to move backwards away from the distraction - have the dog sit in front - hold position for at least ten seconds - praise - release back to distraction.

Repeat the exercise until the dog starts to respond without prompting. Vary the length of time between repetitions of the exercise.

3. Try the come-fore exercise.

While walking with your dog on lead, command COME and take two to three steps backwards, encouraging the dog to come and sit in front.

Praise enthusiastically for correct responses and use the lead to assist where necessary. Reward where appropriate.

Long line – increasing distance

Be honest! Is your dog responding correctly at least 90% of the time without your prompting? Yes! Then he is ready to progress from your 6ft training lead to a long lead of 5 to 10 metres.

A long-line can simply be some rope or cord purchased at the hardware shop.

When your dog is consistently responding to your command to COME, from a distance of ten metres and away from distractions such as other dogs or people, without any prompting, then you might consider trying the exercise completely off lead.

Ready to go off lead???

The first time you attempt the exercise off lead, use an enclosed area such as a friend's backyard or a tennis court and keep distractions to a minimum. Ensure the dog really wants the reward on offer. Allow the dog to explore the new environment and become somewhat bored with it before attempting the exercise.

When your dog responds correctly, pay a highly valued reward because of the increased difficulty. Use lesser rewards for easy recalls at home, without distractions. If the dog does not respond correctly, go back to on-lead recalls.

A bond of respect and trust

The principles and methods that we have discussed are consistent with establishing a bond of respect and trust with your dog.

If you are not interacting with your dog in a manner that gives him confidence in you, your dog may not have sufficient confidence to follow your directions and may feel the need to look out for himself. This can result in the creation of anxiety in your dog and

subsequent behavioural problems. Your dog will become less and less responsive to you and your commands.

Dogs will work with other social animals to achieve what they want – use this fact to your advantage. Take control of every situation so that your dog understands that individual pursuits are a waste of time and effort, but working with you, gets the world! E.g.: your dog can only eat if you have given the release command; the dog must behave calmly to get to go for a walk (no pulling on the lead, jumping, etc); he needs you to give permission to enter or leave the house, crate or car. Use the dogs' natural instincts to have him working with you instead of against you to get what he wants.

Ultimately, training of the Recall will be dependent on two principles:

- The dog's motivation to want to respond to the command.
- The dog understanding that the command is not optional. If the two were on a scale, motivation would be far higher! You have to work at that one.

Dogs are grand masters at working out how to get what they want! We need to be cleverer to ensure that the behaviours they use to successfully get their own way are the behaviours we desire.

All dogs can be trained to come when called reliably. Though admittedly, certain breeds and some individuals are easier than others. The time and commitment you are prepared to devote will have a large effect on your success. Keep it happy and enjoy your dog!

Notes by Vicki Austin, CPDT-KA, Canine Behaviour and Training vickiaustin.com.au