

# Coming to Agility

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Practice Makes Pawfect

We've talked about how Stay is important in agility (and life). Probably even more important is the Come or Recall behavior. How many times have you had this happen? "Rover come, Rover, Come! Come here right now. ROVER!!!" Since agility is an off leash sport, you must have your dog's interest and active partnership. You need to be able to call them closer on course or all the way to you at the end of the run to put the leash back on. Even with that interesting smell, squirrel or the other dog over there who really wants to play. Having a fool proof recall is the goal. The big question is how to get that? As usual, it starts at home and not on the agility field.

First let's take a look at ways you can lose or even ruin a recall. Calling the dog and punishing them when they get to you for whatever they were doing before coming. Calling them away from fun and putting them away or into a less fun situation. Calling the dog and never rewarding them or even acknowledging them when they get there. Calling them and not really caring if they come. Calling them repeatedly and never enforcing that they actually do come. Never actually teaching it as a behavior to the dog in the first place.

Most of us just want an obedient family/sporting pet and don't want life to revolve around dog training. But obviously you have to train a recall (or maybe even multiple recall cues). Pick what word(s) you are going to use. Will it be or include the dog's name? We typically use their name so much it is often meaningless as a recall command. I want my dog to look at me when I say their name, not necessarily come to me. Also, there are times when we would like the dog to come with us, there are times we need the dog to come, and there are times when we NEED the dog to come right now! Training a variety of cues will make things clearer to the dog. "Rover, come-on" or "Here" said casually can mean "I'm heading this direction, come if you want". "Come" said firmly could mean "I'm going to enforce that you come to me". "COME!" screamed hysterically means

"You are going to get the best darn reward in the world!" and you have trained it that way so when you need it, the dog absolutely responds. These are just examples of how to give the dog different contexts so you don't dilute the command you think the dog should respond to. In all these examples, the dog



should still get some reward (treats/play/praise) for coming to you.

Teaching the dog the standard "Come" means starting with short distances and no distractions (like on a short leash in a small boring room) and always rewarding when they come to reinforce the behavior. When they are responding correctly the majority of the time you can increase distance and distraction levels slowly. AKC has a good write-up online about training a reliable recall and there are lots of other sites with good information. Search the web for a myriad of games you can use to reinforce and solidify the dog's response to your cue.

Since "Come" is the version you expect the dog to respond to in normal situations, you should always be able to enforce the dog coming to you. Not "Force the dog", but "Enforce that they come" by taking away other options. This could mean that they are on leash or even a long line and you will walk them down or that they are contained in a small area and you will go get them anyway. (Shock collars are not allowed in agility and I don't recommend them.) Don't forget to also train the emergency recall screamed "COME!" with your super-duper treats and play.

The hardest part is training yourself not to ask the dog to come when you know there is a good chance they won't and you can't enforce it. Or calling them to you and making it a bad experience for them. The more you practice and reward the recall in daily life, the more solid your dog will be in the behavior. Coming to you should always be rewarding for the dog in some way. Like getting to play more agility.



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