

Teaching your dog to “Come”

Definition:

"Come to me."

Practical uses:

Coming when called is one of the most important and useful commands you can teach your dog. In an emergency, a reliable “come” or recall can save your dog’s life, but most of the time it’s just convenient to be able to get your dog to come when called. Because it is such an important behavior, use your best treats and most enthusiastic praise for successful recalls.

How to teach:

Make sure your dog understands the clicker game (see handout “Getting Started with the Clicker”).

Start training in a quiet place with few distractions. Be 100 percent sure he will come to you. With the dog a short distance from you and on leash, say his name. When he looks or turns in your direction, click and say your recall cue word (choose a word that does not already have an association for your dog). He will come the rest of the way to you because he knows that click means a treat is coming. When he reaches you, take his collar in one hand, and with the other hand provide a steady delivery of high-value treats (something he doesn’t get every day, but really loves) and praise, petting, play or other rewards he really likes for at least 20-30 seconds (time yourself; this will feel like a long time). This is called an “extended-duration” reward, and you want to do this EVERY time you are practicing the come. We want the dog to understand that come means come all the way to me, and we want to desensitize him to having his collar grabbed. We also want him to know that coming when called always results in the most wonderful things. Gradually increase the distance between you and the dog when you give the cue to about six feet or the length of your leash.

Practice one recall like this two or three times a day (remember to do your extended duration reward every time), every day for one week before moving on. Within a few days, your dog should be coming enthusiastically every time. Be sure you only say your recall cue word once each time you practice.

Moving on:

- During the second week of practicing two to three recalls a day, start increasing the distance from which you call your dog. You should use a long line to keep control of the dog. If you call and the dog does not come, do not repeat the command. Wait a few seconds and then call your dog’s name. If he looks at you, click and call him to you. He should come all the way to you for his 20 -- 30 seconds of high-value rewards. You may need to temporarily decrease the distance in order to give the dog several successes before asking for more distance again.
- After two weeks of practicing this type of recall, your dog should be coming every time you call. If not, go back to a distance where your dog does come reliably and practice from there for several days before increasing the distance again. You may also want to think about whether your rewards are rewarding enough from the dog’s point of view.
- Now you can reduce your practice recalls to once daily, while you increase distance and distractions (see below). If at any point your dog is having trouble with distractions and/or distance, go back to practicing two to three times daily where you are 100 percent sure your dog will come. Be sure to ask for a recall at least several times a week for the first three months, always rewarding with the extended-duration reward.

Tips:

- As you increase the distance, it may be helpful to have a partner who holds the dog loosely while you get into position and then releases him when you say “come.” Encourage the dog enthusiastically all the way to you.
- It is very important to remember that coming must always result in something positive. If you call your dog to scold or punish him, he will think he is being punished for coming and will not want to come next time you call him.
- Practice come on leash or a long line for at least the first six months, so that your dog doesn’t learn to play “keep away” or “chase me” with you.
- Take hold of the dog’s collar with one hand as you reward him from the other hand every time he comes. This prevents the dog from playing “keep away” and accustoms him to being grabbed by the collar.
- Off-leash practice should only be done in a confined area (indoors, a tennis court or fenced yard) and only when your dog is coming consistently and reliably on-leash.
- The cue word you use for coming when called should always mean “come all the way to me, let me take hold of your collar, and I will give you the very best treats and most lavish praise.” In those situations where you just need the dog to come into your general vicinity, use a different word.

Adding distractions:

- Once your dog is coming on cue from a distance of 20 feet or so, you can start to add distractions. While the dog is coming, have someone bounce a ball, ring the doorbell, offer a treat, etc. When you first add distractions, make the come very easy; for example, call the dog from a very short distance, be enthusiastic, and use your extended-duration reward. Do not let the dog be reinforced by the distraction (i.e., don’t let him get the ball or treat that is being offered as a distraction).
- If you have been training in a quiet location with few distractions, start practicing in locations with more distractions. If possible, increase the environmental distractions gradually. So, if you have been training in your living room, move to the back yard, then the front yard, then a quiet park, then a busier park. And, as always, make it easier for the dog to succeed when the environmental distractions are more difficult.

Come Games

There are lots of fun ways to practice your recall. See our handout entitled “Come Games.”

Come Games

Game 1: One-upmanship Comes

Working with two people, have one person hold the dog. The second person should be around ten feet away (you can make it further as your dog gets better at this game) and should call the dog. Person #2 praises and treats generously when the dog comes. Person #1 now calls the dog back and tries to “outdo” person #1’s praise. Continue calling the dog back and forth, competing with each other for who can give the best rewards. Make sure the dog is enjoying the rewards and is not frightened by effusive praise.

Game 2: Come and Fetch the Treat

Use a food treat that is large enough so that your dog can see it when it is tossed on the ground, such as cheese puff balls. Roll the treat. As soon as she gets the treat, call her back to you. When she gets to you, click and roll a treat in the other direction. Repeat. Occasionally have your dog come all the way to you, click and do your collar grab as you give her an extended-duration reward (20 seconds or more of praise and treats).

Game 3: Come While Out on a Walk

While out walking your dog on a leash, in a happy voice say “Duffy, COME,” *while you quickly back away* — your movement will entice him to come toward you. When he reaches you, stop, click and touch his collar as you deliver an extended-duration reward. You can do this several times when you are out on a walk. Gradually

progress to giving the command when he is distracted by something else (such as another dog walking by or a squirrel).

Game 4: Hide and Seek

Have someone hold your dog in one room while you hide out of sight behind a piece of furniture or around a corner. Call your dog to find you. Make it easy at first, so she'll easily find you, then gradually make it harder. Use your extended-duration reward and/or play a favorite game when she finds you.