

Recall Exercises

Coming when called is one of the most important commands your dog must learn from both a usefulness and safety standpoint. Dogs will not automatically come when called (!) so training is necessary. The following are exercises to strengthen your dog's recall.

Indoor Exercises

At the very beginning of training, it is important to practice in a low distraction environment. This way, the dog is more likely to succeed and be rewarded.

1. Say "come" and then back away from the dog, clapping and praising as he approaches you. Stop and ask him to sit. Take his collar with one hand and then give him a treat from your pocket with the other hand. Repeat several times.
2. Call the dog from 8-10 feet away. Praise as he comes toward you. When he arrives, ask him to sit, take the collar and give him a treat, just as in exercise #1. If he doesn't come, immediately go get him: interrupt what he's doing and back away with him to your calling location. Get him to sit and praise warmly. Repeat until he comes on his own and earns a treat. If he is reliably coming from 10 feet, increase your distance gradually.
If your dog likes chasing a ball, you may vary the exercise: teach him to run through your legs for a thrown ball instead of sitting when he arrives. This game will increase his motivation to come when you call him.
3. Send the dog back and forth between two or more people in a room. Each person takes turns calling the dog, getting him to sit and giving a small treat. If he chooses not to come, the person who called goes and gets him, praises and repeats.
4. Call the dog from different rooms in the house when he is not expecting it. When he comes and sits, take his collar and give him a food treat or else initiate something he likes such as a walk or play-period. Always associate "come" with good things.
Never use the word "come" to initiate anything the dog does *not* like. If you are going to clip nails, put him in the crate or end his romp in the dog park, use another cue, such as "nail time," "into the crate" or "time to go home." This will protect your recall command.
5. Here is a more difficult exercise: practice calling the dog **away** from something he is interested in but can't get at. This may be the front door when he is eager to go for a walk, a bone or stuffed chew toy you are about to give him from the counter, his dinner someone is holding or the gate to the dog park. At first the dog may ignore you as he stares at or tries to obtain what he's after but eventually he will see that this is not working and will try coming to you. As soon as he does, give him what he wanted. Teach him that obedience is the way to get what he wants, even if it means moving in the opposite direction from one of these "magnets." Food is not the only reward!
6. Once your dog can do these exercises reliably, practice at other people's homes. Dogs don't generalize well so the more places you practice, the better.

Outdoor Exercises

1. If you have a fenced yard, practice the back-away recall exercise (#1 indoor), on leash at first. Give a food reward from your pocket for the good performances. When he is reliable on leash, practice with the leash off.
2. While on a walk, give the "come" command and then back away from the dog in the direction you just came from. Use plenty of praise. When he arrives, get a sit, take the collar and give a food reward from your pocket.
3. Take a long section of clothesline or other sturdy rope and attach it firmly to the dog's collar. Go to an open area away from traffic and with few distractions. Call the dog and praise as he comes toward you. Get a sit and give a food reward as usual if he complies. Repeat at random intervals. If, when you call, he goes off course or ignores your command, go and get him and bring him back to the spot you were at when you called him. Praise, release him and practice until he does solo efforts worthy of a food treat. Do not drag him in with the line: it is for insurance/emergency purposes only.
4. Once the dog is reliable on the preceding exercises, go to places where there are distractions: dogs and/or people. Work on leash at first and then on the long line.
5. Go to enclosed areas where you can safely practice off leash. Start off with low distraction and then add distractions.

Important Points

1. The more you practice in all environments, the stronger the recall. **Remember: dogs don't generalize well.**
2. Provide accurate verbal feedback. Praise warmly ("baby talk" is great!) as he approaches. Give a sharp No-Reward "Mark" ("Ah!Ah!") the instant he veers off course. Then go get him and make him complete the exercise. Repeat to end on a success.
3. Vary rewards. Do a recall before initiating or giving him *anything* you know he likes. When using food rewards, have some imagination. Dogs love novelty. Reserve the best rewards (e.g. sliced hot dogs, freeze-dried liver, cheese) for the most distracting environments so you are more able to compete. You can also give the nicest rewards for the best performances and lesser rewards for the so-so ones. Don't be boring.
4. Progress slowly and gradually. Don't expect too much too soon. Initially, keep the dog on leash and distractions minimal. Only progress to more difficult exercises when the dog is very reliable at the easier ones. This is a common training error.
5. When the dog comes reliably *every time*, begin to reward intermittently. Praise every time but give food rewards one time in four or five.
6. As with all obedience training, make it fun for both you and the dog. Don't train when you are feeling frustrated or impatient. Keep the sessions short and successful.