



Critters corner present:

How to teach your dog to 'come'

Calling All Canines!

Coming to you when called is one of the more important skills your dog can learn. Although we strive never to put our dogs in unsafe situations, the “come” (or “recall”) command can avert a car-dog collision, a deer chase, or other hazards. On a more mundane but practical level, the “come” command presents your dog with opportunities for freedom precisely because you know you can call her back — in the park, on hiking trails, or anywhere.

To train your dog, you have to convince her that you're more attractive than even temporary freedom. Training sessions should be short and rewards should always be given. But teaching a dog to come reliably is more difficult than it sounds; most dogs learn quickly that they can run faster than you can - and that it's much more fun to escape than to walk placidly by your side.

Ideally, your dog shouldn't be given freedom until she has proven her dependability at coming when called. Until then, you might limit her off-lead (leash) experiences to places where you won't find it necessary to call her back, such as a fenced backyard. Enclosed areas are ideal for training because there's no risk of escape (or injury) if your dog doesn't return when you call her.

Live Free or Eat

How can you convince your dog that coming to you is better than running free? Two concepts to keep in mind are restraint (avoid allowing your dog to learn about the rewards of absolute freedom) and positive reinforcement (teach your dog that coming back when she's called earns rewards).

Restraint can take the form of a long, lightweight check-type lead — check leads up to 50 feet long are available commercially — or just a simple six-foot lead. You need some tool for “capturing” your dog should she choose to be a fugitive from authority.

Positive reinforcements — or rewards — are crucial in any kind of training. For the average dog, food is an ideal reinforcer. Offer an immediate reward – a few pieces of sweetened breakfast cereal or freeze-dried liver bits – every time your dog returns on command, initially, at least. When you feel she's more reliable about coming to you, wean her back to a reward intermittently, every second or third time, and taper off from there. However, there should always be some form of reward or praise at the end of the recall rainbow.

One Step at a Time

Starting in a non-distracting environment — such as your living room or the backyard — get your dog's attention and then back away a short distance. Kneeling on the ground, hold your arms away from your sides and cheerfully shout, “Suzie, COME!” It may also help to run backward a few feet. Remember to keep your voice high and light; no dog is interested in coming to a stern-voiced, glum owner. If this doesn't work, try “Suzie, come, good girl,” praising her even before she comes so that she knows she's not in trouble.

Reward her for coming and start over, increasing your distance slightly. Keep these sessions short and don't expect too much for the first few days. If your dog seems to be losing interest, stop the session after an easy success. As a general rule of dog training, sessions should always be short (approximately five to 10 minutes) and they should always end on a positive note. Gradually increase your distance and, eventually, environmental distractions. When you feel your dog is doing well, try her out in the park or another new place.

Don't remove your dog's lead unless you know she'll return to you; if you're uncertain, walk up to her rather than calling her to you. Any opportunity to misbehave will quickly teach her that freedom's more fun.

Never Punish

One critical rule of training is that you never scold your dog after she comes to you. This is important even if she has just chewed your custom-made, cowboy boots; if she approaches when called, you must praise and reward her. (It's permissible and encouraged, however, to grit your teeth and count slowly to 100 to calm your nerves.) When your dog is familiar with what's expected, try calling "come" while she's busy sniffing or playing — again, a clothesline or other long lead, can provide a gentle reminder and eliminate the chances that she'll reward herself while ignoring you.