

One of the most frequent questions I get from people is about getting their dog to come when called. I ran across the following article in “Fetch” newspaper, May 2008, and although I don’t often re-use other trainers’ info (we all have different styles and approaches), I thought author Mandy Kennedy was spot on. This article basically sums up my general philosophy on teaching the “come” command.

Well-heeled dog, by Mandy Kennedy

The off-leash recall (“come”) is an elusive, challenging command and one of the hardest for owners to master when training their dogs. Difficulties arise when people think of it in terms of their own needs and not the needs of the dog. Dogs, like most animals and people, do behaviors for their own self-interest. If a behavior is reinforced, then that behavior will become more frequent. From our point of view, we need dogs to come to us so we can go home from the park or the beach. Look at it from the dog’s point of view: the off leash “come” means the fun is over. Owners teach their dogs at a very young age that “come” is not a favorable command; that nothing good happens when they come, and therefore the frequency of the behavior happening again diminishes each time you call the dog.

Consistency is the key

A reliable off leash recall is made easier if you remember two simple rules:

- 1) Always praise the dog when she comes to you
- 2) Always set yourself up for success

Always praising your dog when she comes sounds easy, right? Unfortunately, people don’t do it enough. It has to be an absolute. It doesn’t matter how late for work you are, how long the dog’s been gone or any other extenuating circumstances. When that dog starts moving toward you, let her know she’s doing the right thing. Punishing your dog when she comes only reinforces in the dog’s mind what a terrible idea it was to come to you.

To be specific, praise does not mean pat the dog on the head once and say “good dog.” Each dog has its own favorite reward. Get creative! Give special treats or the always sought after belly rub, throw the tennis ball, or play tug with the rope toy. In other words, do whatever floats your dog’s boat!

The second part of the equation is a little more challenging. How do you set yourself up for success? Simply put, don’t call your dog if there’s nothing you can do about it if she doesn’t come. Every time “Sadie” hears “Sadie, come” while she’s playing with another dog and doesn’t respond, Sadie’s learning that she doesn’t have to and that there’s not a darn thing you can do about it. Believe me, she hears you. It doesn’t help to call her ten more times.

Create a successful situation

Start with minimal distractions around your house. Say your dog’s name in a special, exciting tone, when her head snaps to look at you, acknowledge (mark) it by saying “yes” and give her a special treat. (The head-snap is essential and half the battle.) By doing this, you are creating a conditioned response to hearing her name (with a special tone) and turning her head without even thinking about it.

Once the head-snap is in place, you can start incorporating a “come” command. Always start teaching this command in an environment with no distractions and at a time when you’re sure your dog will come to you. An excellent start would be every evening at dinnertime. Say “Sadie, come” and as she races toward you, praise her and give her dinner when she gets there.

It’s also important that you don’t overuse this command. Essentially, you want the dog to want to hear “come” more often. As your dog gets better on the “come” in the house and in the yard, she’s ready to gradually add more distractions. Keep in mind that if you’ve been consistent at this point in your training, your dog should not be hearing the word “come” and not coming!

Taking the (long) lead

At this point in the training a long line can become very useful. A long line is a 20-40’ light leash (attached to the buckle collar) that your dog drags along on walks, hikes, and parks. Although it can be a bit awkward at first, the long line is an incredibly effective tool if used properly and with guidance from a professional dog trainer. The long line is there to prevent the dog from getting reinforcement from anything except you. It is a useful tool to step on if your dog makes a bad decision and doesn’t come when called. If you haven’t used a long line before, it is much more effective to step on the line than to pick it up, no matter how tempting that may be. In fact, most long lines are made of nylon and will cause quite a rope burn on your hand.

Dragging a long line does pose certain safety risks, however. Never leave the line on when the dog is unsupervised and don’t use a long line when more than two dogs are playing because it easily tangles around the dogs. If you’re not comfortable using a long line, don’t use it.

Be patient, pack leader

From a training standpoint, the off leash “come” is the hardest command to ensure guaranteed results and the easiest command to ruin. Be patient! When you do mess up, go get your dog or turn and go the other direction if it’s safe. Remember that dogs are pack animals and if you have a solid relationship with your dog, her instincts will tell her that the “pack” is leaving and she’d better catch up! Chalk up the experience as your mistake (what we call ‘handler error’), not the dog’s. Then either take a step back in the training or set the situation up again another time where you have a line on the dog and are able to be successful.

The “come” command truly illustrates the relationship between you and your dog. Let’s face it, when dogs are off leash, it becomes their decision whether they will come to you. Making yourself the pack leader your dog wants and needs is essential. Be consistent, be unpredictable and most important, outrageously fun to be with!