

## Why Won't My Dog Come When Called?

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**E**ven though it feels like your dog is being stubborn or coming only when “s/he feels like it, coming reliably when called – in dog trainer jargon, the “recall” – is a training task. Good training techniques use what we know about how animals learn. This makes it easy for us to teach them if we are open to learning how to do it. We'll be clear in our communication. We'll break down tasks into reasonable chunks. We'll commit to setting your dog up for success by making learning fast and fun. We'll keep our expectations in line with reality. And we'll practice enough to keep our expectations in line with reality.

If your dog doesn't come when called, that's not a failure to listen. Dogs hear very well but we must learn that they understand things in a very specific way. They won't be trained well enough until we show them that how to apply what they learn in all kinds of situations.

Your dog does/does not come to you because he loves you/he loves you not. His failure to come to you has nothing to do with whether or not he views you as Alpha, Master/Mistress of the Entire Universe, pack leader or a picture window. You are not lacking in some “woo” type of energy.

When your dog is trained, you can call him for any reason and reasonably expect that he'll come! Yes, even your dog who doesn't pay attention now!

A recall isn't “baked into” a dog. Puppies may come to you readily when they're young, say under 12-14 weeks. After that, they're off to explore the world, just as God intended. There are too many birds and squirrels, blowing leaves and smells in the grass more enticing and worthwhile to pay attention to...until that training relationship has begun and is continued throughout the dog's life.

Count your blessings if you have one of those once-in-a-lifetime dogs who comes every time she's called. That just ain't normal!

Even for we humans, learning anything new takes correct repetition before it becomes so easy we don't have to think about it. Remember learning to drive a stick shift? Or learning to swim, dance or play piano?

One way dogs are different from us is they require practice in all environments we expect them to do as we say. This is called “generalizing” and dogs are terrible at it. Once we learn how to drive an automobile stick shift, we can drive ANY automobile stick shift.

A dog would be completely thrown if the car she learned on was a maroon four-door and the car you want her to drive today is a blue sports model, it's raining, there's a hill with a tree on it, and the gas cap is on the other side.

This applies to dog training in that if you call your dog to you indoors and she comes you may be tempted to believe “she *knows*.” Then you might take her to a park and expect her to come to you off-leash. Uh-oh. This is the equivalent of expecting a first grader to solve an advanced algebra problem because she can count from one to ten by heart.

Here are some guidelines to follow *while* training your dog for a reliable recall. Even if you are not purposefully training your dog to come, you may already be unintentionally training him *not* to come.

- Never, ever call your dog to you for an bad reason - from your dog's point of view. These “bad” reasons might include going into the crate when you're leaving for work or even coming inside to spend the day

lolling on the couch, ending a play session, getting a bath, a pill or a nail clip.

But aren't these the times when you *need* the dog to come? Yes. But you'll need to practice coming when called so often that it's automatic first. Otherwise, your recall predicts you're leaving, ending playtime or planning grooming or medicating.

- Let me introduce you to the principle of "Strike While the Iron is Cold." Call her *while* she's already coming to you with the fetch toy, or for pats and praise or for dinner. That's an easy way to pair up meaningful rewards with coming to you. Or, practice coming inside from outside when you DON'T have to leave, and then immediately release your dog to play outside again.
- If you need to get her while you're in training, walk her down and get her. This is made easier by practicing while having her drag a lightweight leash or a long line which is a leash without a handle 15' or longer. You can even make one out of clothesline! Make sure your long-line's material doesn't snag and there are no knots or handles to tangle up.
- Avoid using your dog's name as part of a reprimand. This is a sure-fire way to throw cold water on your dog's enthusiasm to come to you.
- If your dog eventually comes to you no matter how slowly, **do not punish or reprimand** her. Never lose trust. Never make coming to you "dangerous" for your dog.
- Until you are well into training with a high level of distraction, do not call if your dog is running away from you. It's never a good idea to instruct your dog to ignore you

especially when there's something *really* interesting in her field of vision or if she's entranced by a scent. Instead, train your dog so you can reasonably expect a reliable response.

- Walk her down in an arc, getting in her most likely path if possible. By putting both arms out to the side, you can create a visual barrier and herd her in another direction by moving in the direction you want her to go.
- If she knows "Sit" and "Stay," use that. When she stops running, go to her and get a hold of her.
- I repeat, *never ever* call your dog when she is running away from you until you have trained a reliable recall off-leash in a safe area. Walk her down and get your dog.
- Puppies may chase you if you run toward them and then run away. A puppy class client once told me she waved a crumpled Kleenex at her puppy, dropped it and ran away. Curiosity coupled with a short attention span made the dog dash for the Kleenex and run toward her owner.
- If your dog is running into a busy street, do whatever you must without getting yourself hurt.



River, Golden Retriever  
Photo by Dana Fedman

Now that you know some strategies for recall training, how do you teach the dog to come when called, even with distractions?

Well, I'd tell you, but then I'd have to, well, you know, charge you.