

Let's Talk: Six Tips for a Perfect Recall!

Is there anything more wonderful than watching your dog run joyfully toward you? All you have to do is say a quiet word, and Queenie stops what she is doing, turns on a dime and runs with eyes shining toward you. Best. Thing. Ever.

Of course, that doesn't always happen. Is there anything more annoying than being late for a meeting and having Queenie refuse to come back into the house, no matter how desperately you call and clap?

In order to produce more of the former, and less of the latter, here are my six favourite tips for teaching a dog to come, every time you call. You can read more details in the six-week training programs described in *The Puppy Primer* and *Family Friendly Dog Training*.

1. It's a circus trick! Dogs don't tell one another to stop what they are doing and come when called, so think of this as a trick that you are teaching your dog. Recalls have nothing to do with "dominance," but they have everything to do with a dog learning **it's fun to come when called**.

2. Decide on your cue. Pick one word or phrase, and don't do jazz riffs on it "Jasper, come!" works fine, but use a different word if your dog has learned to ignore "come." My favourite cue is actually not a word, it's handclaps. They carry well over a distance, are good at getting a dog's attention, and are less apt to be used in the wrong context.

3. Set up Success. Teaching recalls isn't like teaching a sit or lie down. Dogs do those on their own, you're just asking them to do it on cue. But teaching a dog to stop what it is doing, ignore all interesting things, and run to you is an entirely new concept to a canine. That means you need to start when your dog can't lose — call "come" when your dog is coming to you anyway. Call "come" when you know your dog isn't distracted by something else. Call "come" when your dog is close by. Repeat easy recalls, often only one at a time, fifteen times a day. Gradually build up to more difficult recalls, being very conservative about how much you expect of your dog (especially during adolescence!).

4. Reinforce generously. Think of it this way: You are competing with the environment, and you'd better have some impressive ammunition. Think your corn based, DIY treats are better than rolling in dead fish? Ha! Don't mess around here. Figure out what **your** dog loves more than anything in the world, whether it's pieces of real chicken or playing tug games, and reinforce your dog every time she comes when called. My favourite reinforcement for sporting dogs is to run away from them as they run toward me. Wheee... dogs love to chase! After several yards of a good run they still get chicken or a chance to play their favourite game. Yay—Double dipping!

5. Don't pollute the cue. This is perhaps the hardest aspect of teaching a solid recall. If your recently bathed dog takes off after a squirrel in the back yard and is heading for a mud puddle, don't bother calling 'come' unless you are 99% confident it will work. Put your hand over your mouth, run closer to your dog, show your dog a treat, and call come when your chance of success is much higher. It's painfully easy to teach a dog to ignore a cue, so don't use it when you can't have some control over your dog's behaviour.

6. Teach a "Flying Stop". It's one thing to call a dog who is sniffing in the leaves, but it's another altogether to ask a dog running directly away **from**, you to 1) stop, 2) turn and 3) run back to you. That's three distinct behaviours, which might be why I've found it most successful to teach a "flying stop," and use it before calling a dog back. Granted it's easier with some dogs rather than others, but the basics are simple:

Teach your dog to stop to a specific cue, when he's only a foot or so in front of you. (I use "Whoa!"). Just as in training a recall, reinforce liberally when your dog stops, and set up successes in the first few months of training. Gradually increase the difficulty level, never hesitating to go backward if necessary.

Mostly importantly, think of your dog as a student going through grades one through sixteen. It's your job to start her in kindergarten, and not throw her into graduate school before she knows how to read.

Best of luck to all of you who are working on that perfect recall. Picture me smiling along with you when Prince or Princess comes a running! Reference- Patricia McConnell, PH.D.