

Total Recall

Do any of these frustrations sound familiar: “My dog ignores me when I call him – he pretends that I don’t exist.” “I can’t get my dog’s attention when he’s outside – even things like a leaf seem more interesting to him than me.” “When I try to catch my dog he runs away and we end up playing a game of chase until I get tired and give up.”

Frustrated owners trying to get their distracted dogs’ attention needn’t worry: All you need to learn – and teach your dog – is proper recall technique.

Recall is the term dog trainers use that means getting your dog to come to you on request. A dog with good recall is one that will come to you whether he is inside or out, distracted or not. He will come quickly, instead of stopping to chase a squirrel or have a conversation with the dog next door. Is a dog that can do this remarkable? Not really! His owners have simply taught a reliable recall. And, without knowing it they probably understand elements of canine behavior that relate to recall – the ins and outs and the basic rules of how to get your dog to come back on request.

Understanding Canine Behavior

What is it about dogs that makes recall such a challenge? For one thing, it’s not a natural trait in dogs – in fact, it’s counterintuitive. In the wild, a dog’s best defense was to run from danger, so naturally, the dog that ran the fastest from predators was the dog that survived. To effectively train your dog to come, it is important to understand how difficult recall is for him.

It helps to understand the “competition” you are facing when calling your dog because he is always on sensory overload. Because of this, even the smallest and most innocuous of stimuli – a bird, a fluttering leaf, a passing car, a smell – can become incredibly interesting and before you know it, he’s gone. The competing sights, sounds, and, above all, smells that are almost invisible to us are constantly capturing your dog’s attention.

If dogs could speak, they would describe every item that your next door neighbor is cooking for dinner. How distracting that would be to you on a given day might depend on how hungry you are, but for a dog it is one of a host of distractions he encounters. Understanding the competition enables you to moderate the way you call your dog and make you less judgmental about his response – or lack of one.



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Finally, the most important aspect of canine behavior in terms of recall involves how dogs learn or, more accurately, how they are unable to learn. Dogs cannot “generalize” the things that we teach them. Generalizing is something that humans do easily, so we assume dogs can as well. Science has proven that the canine’s brain functions differently than ours. As young children, we are taught to “sit” or “lie down.” We understand quickly and easily that sit and lie down always mean the same thing. A child is soon able to sit in the chair, car seat or on the floor and lie down on the bed, couch or on the lawn. For your dog, every time the situation changes or he becomes distracted, the skill must be taught again. Your dog needs help to “generalize” skills you teach him by practicing it in every possible situation until he completely “gets it.”

Teaching a Reliable Recall – Get Happy!

The lessons of recall are best learned as early as possible in a dog’s life. Even so, the process of learning recall can take up to six months before it can be relied on. The first step in teaching recall is to pick a word – one that has not already been overused or rendered meaningless. For example, the word “come” is usually a word your dog

has heard so many times she virtually ignores it. Pick a new word like “here,” “quick,” or “now.” A word with one syllable is best.

The next step is to put your dog’s leash on him. You never want to call the dog without being able to enforce the recall – or make sure he comes to you every time you call. Then (and this is the part most people have trouble with) get happy – extremely happy! Since we know that dogs do not come easily, it makes complete sense that the dog will not come to you if he thinks you are angry, upset or frustrated with him. Put a smile on your face, a treat in your hand, and in a high and animated voice say “Jake, here!” Your dog must view you as the most interesting and pleasing thing he knows.

Call your dog in your happy voice. If he doesn’t turn around and come to you immediately, call again. This time, give the leash a gentle tug towards you. As soon as he’s where you want him, touch his collar and then quickly deliver a tasty treat and praise. The collar touch conditions the dog to come toward you without backing away. Do this at least twenty-five times in each room of the house. If he starts doing this exercise well each time, you can drop the leash and repeat the exercise once again allowing the dog to come on his own. Once your dog “gets it” indoors take the exercise outdoors and practice it.

If you have a backyard, start there. With the leash on and back in your hand, start from the beginning and be aware of all of the distractions like smells, sounds and movements caused by the wind, small insects and so on. When training outside, use a treat that is a “high value item” for the dog. Try very small bits of string cheese, cut up apples or whatever your dog values most. In doing this you must be very clear – you are training, not spoiling. The dog is learning a very important skill that may one day save his life.

Once your dog responds well in the backyard, take him where there is more activity; the front of your house or a small park. Repeat the exercise, keeping the leash in hand and using it when necessary. You have added the distraction of cars, people, and other dogs. Repeat the exercise at least fifty times on at least ten different occasions so your dog learns recall in every possible situation. Remember, as circumstances change you need to help the dog generalize this skill. In doing so, you give yourself an insurance policy – the more you successfully test your dog, the more reliable his recall in the future.

The next step is to return to the backyard and start the exercise again with the leash attached but not holding it. If the dog comes reliably with the leash on the ground, keep it up. If the dog seems too distracted and comes only half the time, you know you’ve moved too quickly. Take a step back, pick up the leash and start again.

Once this is mastered, purchase a long leash or rope (at least 30 to 40 feet) to test your dog at a greater distance, repeating the first two exercises in the house. Once your dog has learned to come without the long leash inside the house, it is time to put the leash back on and go outside.

Once you are outside, wait for the dog to get involved in sniffing or playing with a toy; when he least expects it, call him in your happiest voice. If you need to use it, give the leash a tug. Start becoming more selective about giving out treats. If the dog saunters over slowly or stops to sniff something on the way, say “Sorry” or “Too bad” and withhold the treat. Only treat him if his recall is quick and energetic.

Recall is one of the most difficult skills to learn. My own dog, a year old cattle dog mix, has recently discovered the neighbor cats. When a delivery person left the door wide open last week, she flew out and was gone. It took all the discipline I could muster to stay calm and follow the rules of recall. I waited patiently for her to chase the cats away then grabbed some treats and a squeaky toy and made an absolute fool of myself jumping happily up and down, clapping my hands and squeaking the toy. Since the thrill of the cats was gone, I was the next best thing. As she came toward me, I touched (grabbed, let’s be honest) her collar, and delivered a treat with a deep sigh of relief. I’d managed to get her back without major incident. Even for a trained professional recall can be hard. It is not magic. It is a simple understanding of canine behavior coupled with following the rules of recall. Anyone can do it – yes, even you! 🐾

The Ten Rules of Recall

1. Always be happy and animated when you call your dog.
2. Have tasty treats or toys or whatever your dog values most ready at all times.
3. Pick a word for a verbal cue that is not already tuned out by the dog.
4. Don’t be afraid to make a spectacle of yourself so your dog is more interested in you than competing distractions.
5. Always be able to enforce the recall – don’t set yourself or your dog up for failure.
6. Do not allow your dog off-leash in an unconfined area before you have taught a reliable recall.
7. Once you’ve taught a reliable recall you are allowed to call your dog twice. If he does not respond by the second time, go get him, put him on leash and lure him to where you want him, saying “Good, here! Good dog!” Then give him a treat!
8. Do not under any circumstances chase your dog – always lure him backwards.
9. Never call your dog for anything he or she associates with punishment.
10. Never, not under any circumstances, yell at your dog or get angry at him for not coming when called.