



Training Plan: Teaching ‘Come’

Why this cue is useful for your dog to know: Recall (getting your dog to come when called) is the most important behavior you can teach your dog. Although no recall on cue is 100 percent guaranteed, it could get your dog to come back to you if he dashes out the door or slips his collar. And getting him back to you could save his life.

End behavior: The dog comes when called, regardless of the environment or situation.

Step 1: Start the training in a quiet area with few distractions. With the dog on leash and using a lure (something that the dog really likes, such as a treat), walk backward, and as the dog walks with you, say “come.” Click while the dog is walking, grab his collar and give him a treat. Repeat 3-5 times.

- If the dog is uncomfortable with having his collar grabbed, play “gotcha” with him. While you are sitting next to him, reach out and grab his collar. As soon as you grab his collar, give him a delicious treat and let go. Keep practicing in short increments (5 or 10 times in a session) until he is comfortable with having his collar grabbed.
- If the dog isn’t interested in moving with you or is moving slowly, try jogging backward instead of walking.

Step 2: Stand a few feet away from the dog and say his name. Once he is attentive, say “come” and praise him as he is coming to you. Click while the dog is coming to you, grab his collar and give him a treat. Then praise and pet him. Repeat 3-5 times.

- If the dog doesn’t know his name, see “Training Plan: Teaching Name Recognition” and teach him his name before you move on.
- Make sure to grab the dog’s collar to prevent “fly-bys.”

Step 3: Move a little farther away from the dog. If possible, have someone else hold him. Say the dog’s name and when he looks at you, say “come.” Praise him as he comes to you and click while he is moving toward you. Grab his collar and give him a treat. Repeat five times.

Step 4: Increase the distance a bit between you and the dog and repeat the exercise. Have the dog come to you at ever greater distances.

Proofing

Proofing means teaching the dog to generalize the behavior in different contexts.

Locations and distractions: Practice someplace with few distractions (e.g., in your backyard), then in different places with steadily increasing distractions (e.g., other people, other dogs, loud sounds) until the dog will come to you no matter where you are. If needed, go back to Step 2 to make sure he still knows the cue.

Handler: Have other people work with the dog on “come,” starting from Step 2.

Notes

Teaching a dog to come is generally easy, but it can be difficult to maintain consistently. Be careful not to “poison” the cue. If the cue “come” always means that the fun stops, the dog will stop coming! So, more often than not, let him go back to whatever he was doing before you gave the “come” cue. Also, make sure you are using the same cue consistently (i.e., always say “come” rather than variations of it such as “come here” or “c’mon”).

If you get stuck on any step, stop and take a break. When you try again, go back to the previous step in the plan. If necessary, create intermediate steps with intensity and duration that your dog is comfortable with. For example, if you are having trouble going from Step 1 to Step 2, try standing a few feet away and then walk backward (to prompt your dog to move forward) and say “come.” Don’t rush: Take it at the dog’s speed.