

WHY WON'T MY DOG COME WHEN CALLED?

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A huge point of contention between pet parents and their dogs is the dog's failure to come when called. One of the most maddening aspects for me as a trainer is explaining over and over that a reliable response to a "come" signal – in dog trainer jargon, the "recall" – is a training issue, not a failure to "listen" (she heard you) or because "she's got a mind of her own." Of course she does. After all she's a separate sentient being of another species!

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-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 listen!

Dogs aren't programmed to come when called unless we teach them. They may 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 is begun and 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 us, 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

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perform in. For us, 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 unknowingly training him NOT to come.

- Never, ever call your dog to you for an unpleasant 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 dog will predict 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 get caught up in.
- Avoid using your dog's name as part of a reprimand. This is a sure-fire way to dampen 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.
- If your dog is running away from you chasing something, do not call. 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.