

## Come When Called

### What does the behavior look like?

Every dog owner's dream is that her dog comes when called – no matter the circumstances. The *reliable* off-leash recall (also known as the "Come") is an elusive and challenging behavior to master, requiring a tremendous amount of patience, consistency and good timing. A dog who comes when he's called reflects a solid relationship with his owner, one that's based on trust, positive reinforcement and consistent training.

### Why should we learn it?

The recall cue is mandatory if you want to walk your dog off leash, both for your dog's safety and as a common courtesy. There are real advantages to walking dogs off leash: increased exercise and mental stimulation and, of course, fun for both dog and owner. From a behavioral standpoint, off-leash walking is also a good idea, since leashes often exacerbate poor behavior. However, just because a dog is off leash doesn't mean that he doesn't have to be well trained.

### How do you use it?

We recommend that you do any outdoor off-leash training on a long line. A long line is a 20 to 40 foot light leash (attached to the flat collar) that the dog gets used to dragging along on walks, hikes and beach runs. This is NOT a retractable leash. The long line is there to prevent the dog from getting reinforcement from anything except you.

Why do all this with a long-line rather than a regular leash? Well, first of all, regular leashes are short, and the dog can always feel it, so he understands that when it's on, he must perform certain behaviors and when it's off, he can go his merry way. Secondly, taut leashes can cause frustration, and frustration can cause what we call leash aggression – that is, the dog acts aggressive only when he's on a leash, never at other times. And thirdly, we're interested in getting a recall from a long distance away; you must make him think he CAN go far away!

### **Two rules when teaching a Reliable Recall**

**Rule One:** Reward the dog when he comes to you – *no matter what!*

The reward needs to be something that your dog finds rewarding. This might be a truly excellent treat, a great game of fetch or tug, sincere praise and admiration or whatever is unique to your dog's desires at that moment. Tug is a particularly successful recall reward because the dog grabs the tug and is then physically connected to you via the toy. Please review our **Play: Tug & Retrieving Games** handout.

**Rule Two:** Set yourself up for success.

This basically means do NOT call your dog if there's nothing you can do about it when he doesn't come. Every time you call him while he's playing with another dog and he doesn't respond, he's learning that he doesn't have to – and there's nothing YOU can do about it!



**Training:**

**Pre-Requisites:**

- **Attention:** First and foremost, ensure that your dog will give you his attention (look at you) when you call his name. Please review our **Attention** and **Marker & Release Cues** handouts.
- **Cue:** You may need to change your recall cue to something brand new if you haven't been setting yourself up for success and your dog has learned he can ignore you.
- **Location:** Begin your recall work in a non-distracting environment, when you're sure the dog **WILL** come to you. An excellent beginning would be every evening at dinnertime. Your training program should progress to more distracting environments slowly and systematically.

**Teaching a Reliable Recall:**

1. Call your dog's name, mark his attention and as he moves towards you to collect his reward, move away from your dog (this should make him come to you more quickly). Remember, you want to practice the behavior the way you would like to see it performed in real life. Fast, direct, and immediate.
2. As he approaches, label the behavior with your recall cue.
3. When he catches up with you, he has earned the reward. It is imperative that your reward is more motivating than anything else in that particular environment. So, make it **FUN and rather extensive!**
4. Release your dog back to whatever he was doing before (assuming it is appropriate).
5. Once your dog is readily responding to this sequence, change the timing on the cue so that you are saying it before the dog starts to come.
6. Over time, move to more and more challenging environments.



### Training Tips

- Use the long line if you are working outdoors.
- You must say the recall cue before you step on the long line, otherwise the dog will only respect the line and not the cue.
- If your dog decides not to come, you step on the long line. This should distract him enough to give you another shot at getting his attention.
- It is much more effective to step on the line than to pick it up, no matter how tempting that may be.
- Long lines can be challenging in heavily wooded areas. Practice your recall in relatively clear locations so the dragging line doesn't catch on anything.

### Troubleshooting:

My dog comes slowly and reluctantly, if at all:

- Examine your reward and ensure that it is truly motivating. Experiment with different food and toys.
- Practice just running away from your dog and letting him chase you and get a reward. Add the words later.
- Examine your relationship with the dog. Are your training methods too harsh? Is your dog afraid of you?
- Learn and play the "Find It" game which encourages your dog to return to you for a game. Please review our **Find It** handout.
- Teach your dog to play hide and seek (you are the hidden object) so keeping an eye on and finding you becomes a game. Play hide and seek during off-leash walks (if it is safe to do so).
- Make sure that coming to you doesn't always end the fun. Recall your dog, reward and release back to play.
- If you do have to end the fun, go and get your dog rather than using your recall cue.

I have ruined my recall word:

- Choose a new word and start over from the very beginning.
- Consider taking a class or working with a private trainer to ensure that your technique is solid.
- Use a long line and don't remove it prematurely. It takes months to teach an effective recall under multiple circumstances.

My dog chases wildlife and other dogs:

- Don't allow your dog off leash in these areas until he is truly advanced. Your program will be ineffective if your dog practices chasing these types of distractions.
- Give your dog an alternative toy to chase in open spaces, perhaps a ball or a Frisbee.
- Build up your own motivation program. It is easier to prevent your dog from learning the joys of chasing other animals from the time he is a puppy than it is to cure the problem later in life.

### Safety Concerns:

Dragging a long line can pose some safety risks. Never leave the line on when the dog is unsupervised, and don't use one when more than two dogs are playing; it easily tangles around the dogs. If you're not comfortable using a long line, DON'T.



**Training Resources:**

Marin Humane's **Behavior & Training** conducts regular **Loose Leash Walking and Recalls** classes. Sign up on our [Behavior & Training](#) page for the next available class or series.

We also provide **Dog Training Instructors** and **Consultants** available for private training or consultations (on-site or in-home) at 415.506.6280 or [OhBeHAVE@MarinHumane.org](mailto:OhBeHAVE@MarinHumane.org).

Long lines are available for purchase at Marin Humane's **Animal Outfitters Store**. Stop by our store or visit us online at: [Animal Outfitters](#). Please call 415.506.6229 to verify available stock.

