

Coming when called



Young puppies, up to about 12 weeks old, are naturally "programmed" to want to follow. This is a basic survival instinct, and helps ensure that they do not become separated from their mother or other pack members. As they get older they become more independent and inquisitive, and will branch out on their own to investigate new experiences. At this stage, they tend to become rather less responsive, and teaching the recall takes more effort and formal training. It makes sense, therefore, to take advantage of the natural instinct of the young puppy, and develop the habit at an early age.

Wherever you go around the house and garden, if the puppy follows, praise and encourage. Use the puppy's name and a key word such as "Come" or "Here". Take the puppy for short walks in a safe place and you should find that he or she is anxious to follow. Again, use the puppy's name and your command, and keep squatting down at puppy level to encourage, praise and fuss as reward for following. Repeated daily, the "coming when called" habit should be well established by the time the puppy reaches the more independent stage. This early training can be started before the puppy has completed his vaccination course provided he is not in an area where unvaccinated dogs may frequent.

Recall problems

Failure to come when called can occur for a variety of reasons. Usually, if the basic puppy training described above has been carried out consistently the adult recall is likely to be reliable. When this early training has been missed the dog's response may be slow or unreliable. Sometimes something happens in later life which overrides the dog's learned response and he starts to ignore the command to come. Recall problems come in many forms, and it is important to identify the reason behind the dog's failure to come in order to overcome the problem. The following may help identify your particular problem.

1. **The dog comes instantly at home or when not particularly distracted, but if occupied with sniffing something, investigating another dog etc. ignores the command.**
2. **The dog usually comes eventually but is slow to respond and needs several commands before he will obey.**
3. **The dog runs off when out walking and spends the time hunting rabbits etc. ignoring the command to come. Some obsessive hunting dogs disappear completely and get lost.**

These three are simple training problems and improved obedience generally, as well as working on an instant response to the recall command in the absence of distractions, usually improves matters greatly.

4. **The dog runs off, stays in sight, but won't come back.**
5. **The dog comes but hovers just out of reach, darting away when you try to catch him.**
6. **The dog is happy to be approached during a walk but not towards the end of the walk.**

These are all habitual behaviours developed by learning over a long period - the dog is left to his own devices while out walking, but is always called at the same point to have the lead put on, or to be put in the car and taken home. He has learned from experience that when you call him, fun and games are over. The answer to this is to be unpredictable - call the dog lots of times while walking, rewarding with a titbit or game, then allowing him to run on. When you get to where you usually leave to go home, tempt and reward him for coming, clip the lead on, then take it off again, make a big fuss of the dog and continue the walk. A small tasty meal in the car or, if walking, as soon as you reach home may help.

If frightened by something, the dog runs home or back to the car.

The dog comes when called by one family member but not by another

The dog runs away and hides in the house and won't come when called to go out for a walk.

These behaviours are usually caused by anxiety. The dog may be over afraid and unable to cope with sudden noises and panic overcomes his normal obedience. He may be so anxious about encountering frightening things that he doesn't want to go out for walks at all. He may be apprehensive with a particular person or location by association with a frightening experience, or he may have been punished on return for some misdemeanour. These are behavioural rather than training problems, and help in overcoming the fear is needed - phone the surgery for advice.

10. The dog runs off while out walking and makes his way home, arriving on the doorstep some time later.

11. The dog used to make his own way home, but now disappears completely and you are later contacted by the dog warden.

This is the dog that simply doesn't want to be with you! When a dog is slow to respond to a command, a common mistake is to become cross and impatient and angry with the dog. This, unfortunately, is a natural human response, especially when you are short of time and the dog appears oblivious to your efforts to get him to come. A common reaction is to chastise the dog when you DO finally get hold of him. This certainly makes you feel better in the short term, but from the dog's point of view you are not a particularly nice person to be with at that point. Dogs' memories are very short. They associate action with response, and if praised or chastised will connect the praise or punishment with *what they were doing at the time or in the few seconds prior to experiencing it*. Because of this, they never learn that you are cross because they have ignored you for the past half hour, but associate your anger with what they did just before they received it - i.e. coming to you! Consequently, the dog stays well out of range and makes his own way home. If you are then angry with him when he arrives on the doorstep, he decides that going home is not a good thing to do - hence the phone call from the dog warden to come and collect your "stray". Re-training with a long line or free running in an enclosed area from which he can't escape, using only positive reward based methods, helps to overcome this problem.

12. The dog escapes from the house at every opportunity, ignores you when you call him back, and returns home some considerable time later.

Male dogs "bitching" because they can smell a female on heat, and some "streetwise" rescue dogs tend to do this a lot. Castration and improved general obedience help solve the problem.

Training Exercises:

1. The dog should learn to recognise and react to his name! Call his name at home and reward with praise, titbit or a game as soon as he turns towards you. Call his name whenever you are about to feed him, take him for a walk, let him out in the garden, put him to bed etc.
2. Double Recall - this is a great game and can be done in your house and garden initially, then when out walking, and requires at least 2 people. Call the dog, alternating from one person to the other - generate lots of excitement, run around, praise & play. Several people can do this - the more the merrier - this keeps the dog guessing as he never knows who's going to call him next, and is a great way of improving a slow response.
3. For the dog that stubbornly refuses to come when he's got his nose in an interesting smell - attach 40 foot or so of light weight line (cotton washing line is ideal) to his collar and allow him to trail it behind him. Call him; if he doesn't respond instantly, give a sharp check on the line and let go immediately. Encourage him to come for a game or titbit reward.
4. For the dog that hovers just out of reach, again the long line is useful - just walk round him, stand on the line, then walk up it to approach him. Really go to town with the praise and reward and then let him run off again. This teaches him that he's not necessarily going to be taken home as soon as you get hold of him, and that allowing you to touch him can be an enjoyable experience while out.

5. Never go after your dog in an effort to catch him - he is a quadruped who can easily out-run you! If he won't come, run away from HIM - dogs will often chase after owners running off in the opposite direction. Hide behind trees and bushes and get him to find you (at first, let him see you disappear from view so he knows roughly where you are). Greet him with lots of excited praise and a game when he finds you.
6. Call the dog to you lots of times while out walking to **establish the habit**.
7. Teach the dog to **drop instantly** on the command "**Down!**" This enables you to gain control quickly in all sorts of situations, but is particularly useful for nervous, panicky dogs who are more likely to respond to this than to come to you when frightened.
8. **Clicker training:** This is a fun and very effective way to approach recall training - ask for our leaflet on Clicker Training
9. For the really determined dog who ignores all the above methods and is really hard to motivate, an approach based on the dog's instinct to work for his **food usually works**. Divide the dog's meal into 10 small portions and take them with you on a walk. The dog will be called 10 times while on the walk. Each time he comes, reward with one portion of food. If he ignores your call, put that portion away and try again in a few minutes - he's missed his chance with that portion! The first time you take him he may only eat a tenth of his food - he will be hungrier on the next walk. If the amount he eats depends on his response to your call he will very quickly learn to come. When his recall is reliable, take a few titbits with you whenever you go out, call him often, and reward randomly to keep the response good.

As with all training or behavioural problems, if simple retraining is not working, please contact the surgery for further help and advice.