

To Come or Not to Come, It is up to You!

In previous articles, I have mentioned the philosophy of giving your dog only one command and expecting it to be carried out or enforcing compliance. Don't confuse enforce with brute force. I am emphasizing this single command concept here as I will be discussing what is arguably the most important command you will ever teach your dog. Since this is such an important behavior, you will want it to be carried out immediately and with a single command. By its very nature, the come command has a potential for non-compliance because it is never given when you dog is within arms reach as in the sit, down or stay commands. No one will debate that a disobedient dog knows when you can enforce a command and when you cannot. That disobedience is learned by the dog when you inconsistently enforce commands and give multiple commands. The dog learns that it has a choice when it hears, Rover, come.

In the early stages of puppy hood, you can lay an important foundation for the come behavior by creating games and situations that involve your pup coming to you. When pup is accustomed to the collar, fasten a light ten foot cord or flexi-lead to the collar and follow him around the yard as he explores. After a bit, crouch down, slap your thigh and enthusiastically call him to you. When he comes, praise heavily and reward with a tidbit of food. If pup does not catch on immediately, use a tiny tug on the lead, not constant pressure, but a small tug. To entice your pup to start in your direction, you can take a few quick steps away from him to trigger the chase instinct. Praise and treat when pup gets to you. It is important to keep these early sessions very positive and happy. Create situations in these early stages that have a high probability for success. At dinner time, make pup's meal out of sight then call him to you for supper. When pup is active, pick up a favorite toy, shake it or squeak it and call pup to you. Here is a game to play with multiple people. Put pup on the ten foot cord and sit in a circle with pup in the middle. Whoever has the cord, calls pup and rewards with a tidbit of food. Pass the end of the cord to another person in the circle. If pup gets distracted, you can use that quick tug to get pup going in the right direction. Keep these sessions short and stop when pup shows any sign of losing interest.

Before I talk about more formal training sessions, here is a brief list of Don'ts:

- Never call your dog to punish or scold it
- Never call your dog for something it finds unpleasant such as a bath, nail clip or medicine.
- Avoid calling your dog in situations where there is a high probability it will not come. Instead, go get the dog.

The first step in the more formal recalls is to be sure that your dog knows what come means. The games and situations you have created will tell you that. Put pup in a sit-stay and step to the end of the leash. Call pup to you; "Fido, come." Crouch slightly; slap your thigh to entice him if necessary in these early stages. Praise heavily and give a small tidbit. If needed, give that quick tug on the leash. In obedience competition, when the dog is called, it comes in and sits facing the handler. A good game to play with your pup to make sure she does not get the idea to come toward you and veer off at the last second is to call her from the end of the leash as before but as she comes to you, start to trot

backward. Most pups will find this entertaining. You can start off with trotting short distances. When pup is catching on to staying in front of you, then throw in some turns, encouraging pup to follow you and end up sitting at your feet when you stop. You can verbally encourage her but only say, "Fido, come" once.

You can continue these on lead sessions with a flexi-lead or 20 foot cord. Mix in the walks around the yard on that lead and let pup explore. During that walk, practice a few recalls, use the tug if needed and praise and treat to reward the correct behavior.

I ran across an old article recently that had a novel technique for teaching recalls. This method also laid the foundation for more complex behaviors that are taught for upper levels of obedience competition. This was done using paper plates as targets that hold small tidbits of food. Start by putting pup in a sit and let him see you put a morsel of food on a paper plate a few feet away. Release pup with a command such as "go" or "get it". When pup has eaten the food, call him back to you for another treat. Once pup catches on to this, you can graduate to longer and longer distances. You could start in a hallway in your house to minimize distractions and even resort to the nylon cord for the quick tug if needed. After a few weeks with one plate, you can move on to two. Place your dog between plates ten or so feet apart to start with. Send pup to one plate as before and when pup is coming back, send her to the other plate and call her back again. You can take this exercise farther by stepping back from pup and sending her to one of the plates with your verbal command and pointing to the plate you want her to go to. You might have to step in the direction of the plate at first. When pup comes back to you, take her back between the plates and send her to the second plate. As pup catches on, you can step farther and farther away.

When I began this discussion, I emphasized that come was perhaps the most important command. But, don't fall into the misconception that since come is the most important, I can let the others slide and still expect Rover to come when called. Obedience is a package deal and a sure recipe for failure is to take a shortcut and teach one or two behaviors. Go to any dog obedience class and they will teach you and Fido to sit, down, stay, come and heel. By the way, here is a productive way to spend time with man's best friend this winter. Enroll in an obedience class near you. No, not where you buy your dog food, I mean at a kennel club. One night a week for an hour or so will get you up and moving and whether your dog is 10 years or 10 months old you both will benefit from the experience.

You can easily find a kennel club near you by going to the American Kennel Club website, www.AKC.org. From the home page, click on clubs either in the left column or along the top banner. From there click on club search and select either obedience clubs or training clubs.

Have a Happy Holiday and Safe New Year.

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