

The Whole Dog Journal

Games for Building Reliable Recall Behavior for Your Dog

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Take some pressure off by turning your recall practice into fun and games.

I love incorporating play and training, especially when training recalls. The recall is a really important behavior – one that can mean the difference between your dog having to stay on leash or having leash-free romp time. It is also a life-saving skill – like when a dog is running toward a busy road, and you need him to respond to your cue to return to you, quickly! But teaching the recall behavior to your dog can be challenging – and sometimes a little overwhelming.

Take some pressure off by turning your recall practice into fun and games. This can help you and your dog enjoy the training and take it to the next level. Some of these games focus on a specific element of “Come,” while others help build enthusiasm for the recall.

Keep Away

One of the most important elements of coming when called is what your dog does when he gets to you. Dog trainers call this the “finish” or end behavior. To play the “Keep Away” game, first think about what you want your dog’s end behavior to look like. Get a really clear picture in your head. Here is my picture: My dog runs up to me, flies into a sit, and makes eye contact. Some people want their dogs to run up and stand, touch a hand target, or run to their side into the heel position. All are great choices.

Now that you have a picture in your head, help your dog understand what you would like her to do. For a sit-in-front finish, back one step away from your dog, say “Come!” (or whatever your recall cue is) and encourage her to follow. As she comes up to you, ask for a sit, and when she does it, click – or use another marker, such as the word “Yes!” – and reward your dog with a tasty high-value treat. Practice your finish behavior in a low-distraction environment until your dog understands what to do when he hears “Come.” (Dogs usually get it in a few short sessions.) This is where the real fun begins!

Now that your dog knows that “Come” means move toward you and sit in front of you, you can make it more exciting and interesting by adding in the “keep away” piece. Complete the exercise as described above, and then, immediately after rewarding your dog, turn 90 degrees, and say “Come!” while moving a few steps away.

Click (or “Yes!”) and treat when your dog catches up and does the finish behavior. Repeat with the excited attitude of “You can’t catch me!” and then celebrate when your dog does! Gradually make this more fun and more difficult. For example, once your dog is finding your front easily, say “Come” and then turn and run in the other direction for a few steps before you stop. Your dog will enjoy the chase and have fun practicing the finish.

Tips: Be exciting. Use high-value rewards, such as great food treats, tug games, or chase games to build enthusiasm. If you can’t move quickly or run, try tossing your treat rewards a short distance away so that your dog has to run back to you to play again.

Whiplash Head Turn

Where the “keep away” game trains the end behavior of a recall, the “whiplash head turn” exercise trains the beginning – when your dog turns his head quickly away from something interesting and re-orientates to you. There are tons of versions of this game. Here is one of my favorites.

Start with tossing a treat a few feet away from you so that your dog moves away to get the treat. I like to say, “Get it!” as I toss so she knows she has permission to eat it. As your dog is finishing the treat (but before she looks back at you), say her name. As her head turns in your direction, click or “Yes!” and give him a really awesome reward – something *super* special. Then repeat, gradually tossing the treats a little farther away as your dog’s confidence in the game grows.

A fun variation on this game is to toss a treat in one direction, tell your dog to “Get it,” and then, as he grabs that treat, say his name and toss another treat in another direction. Repeat until your dog is racing back and forth. For energetic dogs this is a great way to build excitement for the head turn.

Tips: Timing is important with this game. Be sure to click or “Yes!” when your dog’s head is turning back to you to encourage the speedy whiplash turn. If your dog loves to run, gradually toss the treats farther away so she gets to run more.

Hide and Seek

Hide and seek is a fun game to play in the house, in your garden, or on off-leash walks. It can be played with your dog knowing the game is afoot or as a surprise game, played at unexpected times throughout the day. It helps your dog learn to look for you when she hears your recall word and, when played randomly, it also helps your dog learn to come when she is otherwise engaged.

To get started with the basic game, have your dog wait in one place or one room. If your dog doesn’t know how to wait, you can also have someone restrain or distract her. Go into another room, behind a tree or around a corner and hide. Ask your dog to “COME find me” (emphasize your cue for the recall). When your dog finds you, give a great big happy reward: a game, happy petting, or a special treat. Repeat few times (stop while your dog is really engaged).

Once your dog understands the basics of this game, you can play the surprise version at various points during your day. For example:

When walking at the beach, when your dog is sniffing something, hide behind a nearby rock. Call her “Come find me” and when she finds you, get crazy happy and play one of your favorite beach games such as tossing the ball or running into the water together. Note: If your dog doesn’t head in your direction pretty quickly, pop up from behind the rock and wave your arms so she can get to you.

In the woods, duck behind a tree when your dog is just a little way in front. Call her enthusiastically and when she gets to you, reward her with a small handful of great treats.

When your dog is hanging out at home or cruising the backyard, hide and call, “Come find me!” Reward her with a great game of tug when she finds you.

Tips: When you are away from home, do not make the hiding place too difficult. This may cause too much stress for your dog, which will not be fun. In addition, time your calls so that you know your dog will disengage from his exploring easily. I do *not* recommend hide and seek as a way to frighten your dog into thinking you’ve abandoned him because he was not paying attention. Make this game fun, upbeat, and full of happy reconnections.

Round Robin Recalls

This is a great recall game that involves two or more people. It is also a great game to play after you’ve played “keep away” and “whiplash head turn.” “Round robin recalls” build on your dog’s ability to turn away from something she likes (a person who has just given her a treat) and run to the person calling her.

To get started, you and your game partners will stand about 10 to 12 feet away from each other. If you have two people, you will face each other. With three or more people, create a circle with all of you facing the center. Your dog is with one of the people or in the center of the circle.

One person calls the dog by saying the dog’s name and then “Come!” For example: “Jessie, come!” As the dog looks for the caller, the caller can encourage the dog to come by clapping, opening his or her arms, getting low, cheering, or running a few steps away; encourage your dog in any way *except* by saying her name or giving the recall cue again.

Once your dog gets to the caller, the caller will click or “Yes!” and reward the dog generously. Each person calls the dog randomly and in no particular order. At first, make it super easy for the dog by keeping the distance close, providing encouragement, and rewarding generously and with enthusiasm. As your dog gets the hang of the game, encourage her to do the “finish” behavior when she gets to the caller.

To make this game more exciting, increase the size of the circle so your dog really gets running. After a few play sessions, try having people move randomly in the area to new spots. This helps your dog start to look for and find the caller. (After dozens of play sessions, my dog will now run across the park to get to us when we play this game. We also move from place to place in the park so that she has to figure out where we are; it’s tons of fun and great exercise for us all.) Do remember that your dog runs a lot in this game; stop while she is enjoying it and before she gets too tired.

Tips: At first, have everyone who is calling the dog use the same treats. But after the dog learns the game, you can vary the types of treats between each person. Just make sure they are all things the dog really loves (silly play, great food treats, or a game of tug).

A Few More

Here are three more quick games:

Dinnertime recalls. Have your dog sit or down and stay while you prepare his dinner. When his meal is ready, move a few feet away and say, “Come!” When your dog gets to you, put his dinner bowl down. Once your dog is really good at this game, continue to have your dog stay while you take the food bowl into another room. Call your dog to you; getting to eat his yummy meal is the reward.

“You’re the most wonderful dog” recall. Call your dog to you. When your dog comes, get down on the ground and play, play, play for at least three solid minutes. (I love this game because my dog’s reward is also my reward!)

Get the Ball Recall. Have *two* balls ready. Call your dog to you, and as she comes to you, click or “Yes!” for the sit or finish, and then instantly throw the ball. When your dog gets the ball and has turned back toward you, say, “Come!” – yes, even though your dog is already running your way! Click or “Yes!” when your dog gets to you, and throw a second ball in the other direction as the reward. This game can be fast and furious; it’s great fun for ball-crazed dogs.

Be careful to wait and call your dog back to you *after* she has the ball (so she doesn’t learn that getting the ball is part of the coming when called).

Practice Makes Perfect

Remember, just as when we play any new game with our dogs, it will take a few play sessions for your dog to learn the rules and goals of these “coming when called” games. But once your dog understands and enjoys them, you can get creative, adding challenges to the games, switching rewards, and building up by incorporating more distractions. In addition, make up new games to play and incorporate the things your dog loves into your recall practice. Practicing with games can motivate both you and your dog to train and play your way to a fantastic, impressive recall.

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