

The Name Game

## ***Does your dog really know his name?***

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“Max” ... “MAX” ... “MAX!” ... “MAAAX!!!” With his owner calling his name repeatedly, escalating from a conversational tone to a screech, Max finally turns away from something he’s sniffing toward his red-faced, bellowing owner. If he knows that “Max” is his name, why doesn’t he respond the first time his owner says it?

Max doesn’t respond because he has learned he doesn’t have to until his name is repeated loudly, over and over. Max *hears* his name, it’s just not that rewarding for him to respond immediately. Whatever he is focused on is undoubtedly infinitely more interesting than his owner, who Max figures is just interrupting his fun...so what’s the rush? His owner may even have created a negative association with his name for Max by yelling and punishing him for not responding. Yelling a dog’s name angrily does not exactly encourage a prompt response.

Your dog’s name is actually a behavior cue. Speaking a dog’s name means nothing more than “look at me and wait for further instructions”. It’s called attention, which is what you need before you ask your dog for a behavior such as “Come” or “Sit” or “Stay”. If you want your dog to look to you immediately when he hears his name, you have to become more fun, interesting and rewarding than just about anything else he may focus on. He should hear the angels sing with the sound of your voice! To accomplish that, you need to teach your puppy or adult dog that responding to the sound of his name makes really good things happen.

To teach your dog to respond to his name, say it in a happy voice, once, when he is right next to you (dogs respond to the tone of our voices just like children do). If he looks at you, praise and give him a yummy treat. If he doesn’t, resist nagging him by repeating his name; use a sound (kissy noise, or click your tongue) to get his attention, and when he looks, praise and treat. When your dog is reliably looking to you the *first* time his name is called, slowly start to fade the treats; treat only occasionally but praise consistently.

Don’t expect your dog to respond to his name when he’s in your yard if you have only played the “name game” in the quiet of your home. There are just too many distractions outside (smells, sounds, birds, squirrels, bugs) for him to focus until you gradually teach him to respond in different environments. Begin training your dog to respond to his name indoors, in an area of low distractions. Once he is looking to you reliably, begin to add distractions to your training; try calling his name when he is walking toward his favorite toy, or when someone walks into the room. Praise him lavishly and treat him when he responds, cutting back on the treats when he gets really good at it. Slowly add new distractions to your training, and gradually increase the intensity of the distractions, eventually practicing outside.

Your dog’s name is perhaps the most important behavior cue that you can teach him. Name response/attention is the foundation of all further training. Call your dog’s name next time you are in the yard together or on a walk. Does his head spin toward you? If not, don’t yell at him; lighten up and teach him the “name game”!