

Come Hither!

Why Your Dog Won't "Come" When Called

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"My dog doesn't come when I call" is one of the most common behavior complaints that dog trainers hear from frustrated owners. They claim they've tried *everything*; calling his name over and over, yelling, chasing, using treats to lure him...all to no avail. He's stubborn, they say. Actually, he's smart.

Here is one example, albeit extreme, of why dogs don't "come" when we call. Recently I was cycling with my husband on a rural road in Easton. As we passed a large estate home on a vast expanse of farmland, two barking black Labs came charging from the house toward the road, closing in fast. With no time to accelerate and outdistance them, we dismounted, using our bikes to shield us in case these two were not your average friendly Labs. A woman ran out of the house after the dogs, screaming "COME!" and yelling their names. The dogs ran as far as the deep, wide ditch along the road, continued barking for a bit, finally running back toward the still screaming woman. As we rode off in safety, I watched in the distance as the dogs reached the woman. She not only continued yelling at them, she hit them as well.

Lady, if you are reading this, here is what you taught your dogs: if we return to our person when she says "Come", she goes crazy, yells at us and hits us. It hurts. So, when we hear that word "Come", we're staying away from her for as long as we can!

Most reasons a dog won't come when an owner calls are less dramatic but operate on the same principle; "Come" is associated with something unpleasant. We say "come" when we want our dogs to come inside the house; being outside is so much more fun! "Come" at the dog park means playtime with their best canine buddies comes to a screeching halt. "Come" sometimes means having toenails clipped, getting crated for hours, or something else your dog may find unpleasant. And when they finally do return to us after multiple repetitions of the word in an escalating voice, dogs are often chastised for not coming to us quickly enough. Is it any wonder our dogs resist responding to "Come"?

If you have a puppy, teach him a positive association with the word "Come" right from the start. Take advantage of a puppy's instinct to chase and willingness to follow you by saying "Come" in a happy, upbeat voice as you run a few steps away. Praise your puppy as soon as he starts to run after you and give him a tiny morsel of a yummy special treat when he gets to you. Make it a fun game, gradually increasing the distance between you and your puppy before you say "Come". Once he "gets" it, continue to praise but phase the treats out gradually, treating only occasionally for a job well done. As your puppy gets better at coming, practice in different, more distracting settings. The goal is for your dog to learn that if he goes to his human whenever he hears "Come", good things happen!

If you have an older dog with a negative association with "Come", it is difficult to change his opinion of a word that has meant unpleasant things for years. It's often easier to choose a new

word or phrase for the “Come” behavior; “Here”, “Follow me”, or even “Come, come, come!” said excitedly is different enough from a previous military-like order of “COME!”. Teach the behavior the same way as you would teach a puppy. Older dogs respond to happy voices, fun, and treats as well.

So, what do you do if you want your dog to come to you when the next activity *is not* as fun as the one he is presently involved in? *Make* it more fun and rewarding for him. Give him a favorite toy when he comes inside and play with him or give him a treat-stuffed Kong™ toy when he hops in the car leaving the dog park or gets in his crate. Teaching your dog to reliably come when called is not just a convenience; it can prevent your dog from getting lost, injured, or worse. Just remember to teach your dog that “Come” makes the good stuff happen!