

## Dog health begins with dog safety

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**We've all heard it.** Repeated bellows, becoming increasingly urgent, annoyed, even pleading. Haunting cries from across the dog park: "Rover, Come!," "Rover, Come!!," "Rover!!!!!"

It's all well and good (and even entertaining) when Rover is having the time of his life socializing with his best bud, and he acts like he's never met you in his life. But what if Rover was running toward the road? Or heading off to go say "Hello" to an aggressive dog, or perhaps trying to befriend a porcupine or skunk? The necessity of a good recall becomes apparent in these situations.

As dog owners, we often go to great lengths to ensure the health and well-being of our pets. We diligently research the best food to feed. We faithfully dress our companions in winter coats and booties to protect them from the cold and the salt on the sidewalks. We have a good relationship with our vets and have the Emergency Vet number in our wallet, or posted on the refrigerator. We do all this to keep them healthy, but how much thought do we give to training them to keep them safe?

A good recall is perhaps the most important command we can practice to keep our dogs safe.

If we can reliably call our dogs away from dangers, not only do we look impressive at the dog park, but we give ourselves the ability to potentially save our dog's life. Fortunately, there is still plenty you can do to improve your recall if your dog responds to your commands like the aforementioned Rover. And, like most things in life, the best time to start working on this is now.

In every interaction with our dogs, we are teaching them something. If you are guilty of repeatedly calling your dog and having them ignore you, you have essentially been training them that the word "Come" means "Do what you wish," "Mosey over when you feel like it," and maybe even "When you do come, you're in trouble." If this is what we have trained our dogs to think the word means, can we blame them for not coming the next time we ask? In order to have a reliable recall we need to teach our dogs that "Come!" means something different.

If you've spent years training your dog to *not* come when called. It might be advantageous to start from scratch and pick a new word for your recall exercises. The word "Here" is a good replacement for "Come." Whatever word you choose, you need it to have new and important meaning for your dog. Your recall word needs to mean one thing to Rover: "I better get over there fast the first time they ask, because something really great is going to happen when I get there."

**The following 2 exercises will help get you started teaching the new meaning of the word “come”.**

1. Start with your dog on leash in an area of low distraction. (In your house or yard usually works well.)

Simply say “Rover, come” and quickly run backwards away from your dog. When your dog follows to catch up, take a step toward him to encourage him to sit. If he doesn’t sit, use a treat to lure him into a sitting position, and then reward him with the treat. (You should only need to use the treat a few times until Rover realizes “come” means come and sit.)

Repeat this exercise until Rover is enthusiastically coming every time you call. Be careful that you are *rewarding* Rover with the treat *after* he completes the come and sit, and not bribing him to do it by having the treat in your hand the whole time.

2. On leashed walks (again in an area of low distraction), suddenly run backwards and say “Rover come” in your most enthusiastic voice. Your dog should perk up at the sudden change of pace, and enthusiastically follow. If he looks confused the first couple of times, get your treat out again and lure him into position once or twice until he remembers to run and sit in front of you. Repeat this over and over on your walks together until Rover is coming and sitting like a champ. Praising him as he makes his way to you turns it into a fun game, and will encourage him to get to you *fast*, so he can earn his reward.

As with any command, once it’s solid, the next step is to get rid of the treats by rewarding with other things Rover likes instead. Perhaps allow Rover to sniff his favourite fire hydrant, toss a toy, take a few seconds to play tug, or give Rover a quick ear scratch or belly rub. Find out what gets his tail wagging, and use that as your reward.

Practice these exercises until Rover is racing to you, then you can begin to gradually add in distractions and distance by using a longer leash. You need Rover to be responding every single time, so if it appears he’s backsliding, it usually means you’ve moved too quickly. Go back a step, get it solid, and then slowly add challenges as he’s ready.

Calling your dog away from play at the park or away from a squirrel crossing the road is the equivalent of having your PhD in recall. It’s an attainable goal, but you’ve got to start in grade school, and diligently do your homework the whole way through. You wouldn’t expect a kindergarten student to be proficient in calculus, nor should you expect your dog to come in the middle of a play session until you’ve laid the groundwork for it.

So, until you’ve worked your way up to PhD level, save your breath at the dog park. This way you avoid teaching Rover that “Come” is a command to be ignored. Instead you can silently go get your dog, or keep on walking and reward him when he decides to catch up to you on his own.

For now, keep your dog on leash or a long line around dangers until your recall is solid. Do your homework, set reasonable goals for yourself and your dog, and look forward to the day you can confidently inhale, cup your hands to your mouth and proudly call “Rover Come!” from across the park and have him racing to you.