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Your Smart Dog

Come Here! Part One: How We Ruin Recalls

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Do you dream of a dog that comes running – no matter what—when you call? Envy those folks who can walk their dog off-leash without worry? **With some practice, patience, and lots of rewards, you can teach your dog to race back to your side.**

Coming when called is essential for your dog to learn – so important that I’m going to devote two newsletters to it. **This month we’ll talk about the things we do to ruin a perfectly good recall – things you might be doing right now that teach your dog *not* to come when called.** We’ll also talk about ways to undo the damage that’s already been done. Next month we’ll talk about the actual mechanics of a speedy recall and how to get your dog rocketing in when you call him.

Let’s start by talking about the ways we sabotage a perfectly good recall without even knowing it. Three culprits ruin your dog’s recall: calling him to start something relatively unpleasant, calling him away from something fun, and punishing him when he comes to you.

Take a look at this list – do any of these situations sound familiar? You call your dog and when he gets there, you:

- Put him in the crate while you go off to work?

- Reprimand him because it took him too long to get to you?
- Clean his ears or trim his nails?
- Ignore him or give him a half-hearted “good boy.”

In each example, we call the dog and then start something the dog finds relatively unpleasant. If this pattern has developed over time, the dog learned that coming when called usually isn’t fun.

Three culprits ruin your dog’s recall: calling him to start something relatively unpleasant, calling him away from something fun, and punishing him when he comes to you.

Another way we weaken our dog’s recall is calling him away from something fun. An example: You’re at the dog park and summon him away from playtime with friends. Or you call your dog as he’s running off to say hi to a neighbor. These all end something good. **Your dog learns quickly he has more fun if he doesn’t come when you call him.**

The third way we ruin our dog’s recall is by punishing him when he does come to us. You may not even realize you’re doing this. It’s important that you realize when your dog comes to you, whether it’s right away or minutes after you



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call him, he's still *doing what you asked*. Too often, we scold the dog if he didn't come to us right away. Remember, punishment must happen *during the act* in order to have any effect. **If we punish the dog after he's already by our side, we're actually punishing the dog for coming!** Not the message we want to send to the dog!

Now that we understand how our actions can actually undermine our efforts to teach our dog to come, **let's talk about what we can do to help our dogs.**

The first thing is to start rewarding your dog when he comes to you whether you called him or not. If your dog comes up to say hello, don't ignore him or push him away! Use the moment to teach your dog just how much fun it is to be around you. Praise him, love him, snuggle with him, play with him. This is especially helpful when you're outside and your dog comes to check-in with you. Carry some food treats with you and toss him one or two whenever he comes your way. Your dog will learn quickly that being near you is a good place to be!

Secondly, don't scold your dog when he *finally* gets to you. Even if you're less than thrilled it took your dog an extra minute to come to you, smile, sound cheery, and give your dog a big scratch behind the ears.

Third, pick a word to use specifically when you need your dog to come immediately and directly to you. Make sure everyone in your family knows this word. And don't use it unless you really

need your dog to come immediately and directly! **Don't use this word when you're going to start something unpleasant or stop something fun.** If you need to leave for work, teach your dog to "kennel up," instead of calling him and then putting him in the crate for eight hours. When my dogs are outside (in a fenced yard) and I want them to come inside, I use "C'mon on dogs," instead of my recall word. I know they're out there sniffing the paths of bunnies and squirrels and coming inside probably isn't as enticing. So I don't "waste" that valuable recall word at a time when it's not essential that they come immediately and directly.

Next month, we'll talk about the specific steps involved in teaching the recall. I'll detail each specific step and include some fun games you can use to help teach your dog this important, life-saving behavior. Until then, use the information in this newsletter to start repairing your dog's recall.

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