

Dog Agility Pre-School

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Reliable Recall Training Part I

General:

In agility we need to be in control, and we want our dogs similarly to control themselves *when our dogs are under drive and faced with distractions*. Just as we needed a specialized version of the sit stay, i.e. our “startline stay”, we also need “a whip around and come now” recall, no matter what else is going on. When we do agility our dogs are off leash, under drive and faced with many interesting choices when running in a trial or a class. At a trial especially it is imperative that your dog not interfere with other dogs, in the ring or outside of it. You will also want to warm your dog up before his or her run, when other dogs are similarly warming up off leash with their handlers. Your dog must come to you the instant you call. This skill, however, is not just important in agility—it is important in life. You want your dog to enjoy freedoms, because he is well behaved and will come and will stay when you ask him to. He can go more places with you and do more things and have a better life. Finally, you may need to save your dog’s life one day by using a recall that he responds to instantly, under drive and distractions.

Overview:

We will teach three levels of recall:

1. Name recall, check in. This is the most casual level.
2. Call-off recall, with a special cue, such as “come”. This is your everyday recall, when you want your dog to come to you even if there is something apparently interesting him.
3. Emergency recall or what Leslie Nelson calls the Really Reliable Recall. (Her DVD by that name is excellent, and available at cleanrun.com.)

Teaching and reinforcing the reliable recall is a life’s work. It’s important to start this training right away, especially with a young puppy. If you adopt an adult, you begin this training as soon as your dog becomes settled in your home, within a few days.

Foundation for a reliable recall:

1. You control all reinforcements. Your dog needs you to have everything and anything it wants in life. You are the “gatekeeper” (credit to Rachel Sanders). Reinforcements are everything the dog wants: not only food, but toys, being with you, some game or other, going outside, going inside, playing with other dog or person, going for a ride in the car, going to a special place, etc. This is a place where your MMIB’s come in, as well as your careful use of cues, such as the release cue.
2. Your dog trusts *you* to have its needs and wants in mind at all times, and you are the person who will protect your dog from the world. Read Suzanne Clothier’s “He just wants to say Hi” essay, available on her web site: <http://www.flyingdogpress.com/sayhi.html>. Training with R+ and P- *only* is the foundation for your dog wanting to be with you and spend his time with you, more than anything else.
3. Make sure your dog gets enough exercise. Our class ensures he gets enough mental exercise, but you need also to ensure he gets enough physical exercise. A puppy needs time to run and play, and you let a puppy self regulate the physical activity, otherwise you can harm his joints. An adult dog needs at least 20 minutes of running per day, however you can supply this physical exercise (jogging, playing catch, treadmill). A long daily walk/run when your dog can be a dog, relax, exercise and sniff, is an essential outlet of mental and physical energy. Without that, your dog will have a harder time coming to you when he is called, because he is seeking something he needs.

Rules during training the reliable recall:

1. Never call your dog (name, call-off recall cue) to you when you are going to take away something the dog wants. For example, your dog is outside in the yard and you need to put him in his crate so you can go to work. You can take some treats or a toy and play with him to get him to come to you, but don't call him to you with his name or recall cue.

2. Especially don't call your dog's name to punish him. Although we don't train with P+ ☺, be sure not to use his name to reprimand him or warn him that you are about to take something good away (e.g., he's swiped something off the kitchen counter or gotten into the trash). That is to say, do *not* use his name as a punisher cue (P+ or P-).

2. Never call your dog if you at all suspect he will ignore you. Your dogs already have a history of ignoring your saying their name. Keep this practice to an absolute minimum. If you do call your dog and he does not come, then do NOT re-cue or escalate your cues (verbal and body language). Just go get him, with a treat or something he wants. NOTE: This is NOT rewarding him for not coming when called. You just made a trainer error, so *you* just set your dog's training back. It's your responsibility, not his. You do not then want to teach your dog to avoid you when you silently come get him, after he's obviously too interested in something else to come. He will quickly learn that you are about to take away this reinforcement. So your only choice is to reward him *for not running away from you*. And try not to make that mistake again.

Games and exercises:

1. Check in reward. Divvy up a portion of your dog's daily food. Give a portion to every member of the family. Whenever your dog comes up to you, give the dog a reward. You don't have to initiate this interaction with your dog. This is a reward for your dog paying attention to you.

2. The name game: Pick a name (version of your dog's name) and tone you are going to use when you really need your dog's attention, that you will use when you yourself are excited or even angry. Click your dog's head turn at the sound of his name. He will automatically come into you for a reward. This is the basis for a recall. As your dog learns this, sometimes he will not turn to you at the sign of his name (many of your dogs have a lot of practice in ignoring you when you say their name!). Do not escalate your cues or repeat his name. Instead, do something expected, for example, squeal and run away and play with his toy and not let him have it, or show him the treat you were going to give him and then pretend to eat it. Then immediately say his name, click when he looks at you, and reward when he comes to you, etc.. *Review the use of P- as an effective training tool.

3. Puppy in the middle: Have two of you do the "name game" and then the puppy runs back and forth between the two people. Make this really fun.

4. Hide and seek: Grab a handful of great treats and run away from your dog. At first don't hide, just reward as he catches up. Then gradually increase your "hiding behavior". First make sure your dog sees you running into a closet or behind a door. Next, run into a room with your dog far enough behind you so that he can't see you dive into the closet or behind a door. You get the picture. Eventually, just pick a time of the day where you hide, like right after you get home from work, and your dog needs to find you.

5. Retrieve. Teach your dog to retrieve on cue. Always reward your dog for bringing you stuff. Either trade with a treat, or play with the toy that he brings. If your dog is causing problems by being too pushy, you would then ask him to give you the toy first before you offer the toy for him to play with. With a young puppy you mainly want to encourage him to play and not be too controlling.

6. Call-off recall: Start to add a cue, i.e., COME, with the name game. Then start to set up your dog for "call offs", Many times a day you call your dog off of something interesting to him, such as sniffing a tree or his dinner bowl, and you provide something really valuable, Then release him with your at-ease release cue back to whatever it was. In this way, he learns that there is no penalty for coming to you at the sound of your call-off cue.

6. Long line work. For a dog to learn the recall, he has to work “off leash”. But with a dog in training, you don’t want to give your dog any opportunity to reward himself. Take the various games on the road, in new habitats where you can have your dog off leash dragging a long line.

Be careful with a long line. The larger the dog, the heavier and longer the line you’ll need. Attach a long line ONLY to a flat collar or a harness (better yet). Tie little knots in the long line. You’ll want to step on the long line if your dog starts running away from you to greet another dog or whatever. Be careful not to use your hands or have the line get entangled around your legs because you can get a serious burn or injury if your dog takes off. Like any training, start with less distracting new habitats and continue to reward your dog for coming to you when you cue, either name or call off cue. Set your dog up, so that he knows it’s a set up. It then becomes a game for him to wheel around and get the treat he knows is coming when you call him unpredictably. He knows that the distraction is just a set up and he’s about to get a prize, but only on cue. He also knows he’ll be allowed to go back to the distraction.

There aren’t a lot of places where it is both safe and legal to work your dog off leash (sadly) AND have low distractions. You can start to ask around among your friends to see if you can train in their back yards or back 40. You can also use the Dixon fairgrounds whenever I am there with another class (that is not yours ☺ but you can certainly stay after class to work your dog).

Note: use your record keeping here. Get out your list of your dog’s reinforcements and his distractions. Pair opposite ends of the list. When you are in low distractions, use lower value rewards. As you up the distractions, you must up the rewards. However, as in all training, I recommend you vary the rewards and occasionally surprise your dog with a high value reward no matter what. When you are working under higher distractions, you will use *on average* higher value rewards.

Summary of games and exercises:

These all teach your dog the first two levels of recall, the attention to their name and the call-off or everyday recall. Stay tuned for the emergency recall, Really Reliable Recall Part II.

References:

Really Reliable Recall DVD by Leslie Nelson
He just wants to say HI by Suzanne Clothier

*Use of P- as a training tool:

Reminder: To use P- as a training tool, there are two rules. 1. the dog must know that you are taking away a reward it *could have earned* by doing a specific behavior and 2. you *immediately* give your dog the chance to earn it by doing the correct behavior. Otherwise, a P- is nothing more than a management tool.