



RECALL TRAINING IS IMPORTANT: Recall is a must-have skill for your dog. It's a safety feature that needs to be "programmed" into your dog to keep him out of danger. It makes your daily life easier as a dog with a solid recall will come in from the backyard when you call him or will move away from an elderly neighbor who he might accidentally topple over. And a solid recall just makes life more fun! It's what allows you to take your dog off-leash hiking in areas that allow it and will have him disengage from playing with another dog when it's time to leave a playdate.

When we are talking about a rock solid recall we are not talking about the kind of recall we use when we ask the dog to stay and then call him to us. In fact, the stay command is rarely used when training this type of recall, outside of a few of the games that we use to train it. Using a stay command implies to the dog that a release command is coming, so he is ready for it. Though this type of recall is important, it doesn't help you much if you are out hiking and call your dog to return to you.

We are also not trying to train a "militant" recall where the dog returns to the handler simply because of a sharp tone of voice or rigid/intimidating body posture. That's not how you call your dog to come to you most of the time and we want to train a recall that will serve both handler and dog in daily life.

There are a couple of things to keep in mind when training the recall.

- Make sure that the word you choose for your recall cue is easy to remember, is salient and not something that you often use in a different context and is something that you don't mind saying in public.
- It is very helpful as you begin the training if you already have an emergency stop in place with your dog. This serves as a back up plan, both while training and beyond in the event that your dog does not listen to your recall cue.
- It's also important to already have a cue that lets your dog know you are "all done" and he can go back to enjoying his environment.
- Know why you are calling your dog and what you expect him to do. Are you calling him to put his leash on him or are you calling to ask him to come back and check in with you? Sometimes we simply need to give our dogs further information, like which branch of the trail up ahead we intend to take. In this circumstance you don't necessarily need him to come back to your side. You just need him to head in your direction and engage with you.
- Avoid calling your dog only when you want to end his fun. If that's the only time you ever call him, such as when you want him to come in from the backyard, he learns that coming when called is not to his advantage. And never call your dog to you to do something he may find unpleasant, like trimming his nails or giving him a bath. In these situations, you should go and get your dog instead.
- Don't devalue your recall cue by repeating it over and over again without getting the desired result. If you are doing that your dog isn't hearing what you are asking him to do. He just hears you as white noise in the environment. If you have already devalued a cue, choose a new one before using it for any of the games below.
- Behaviors that are reinforced are repeated! A recall is always worthy of payment in the form of a treat or some interactive play.



HOW DOGS LEARN A RECALL CUE: Dogs are pretty amazing creatures and demonstrate their intelligence by learning in different ways, often at the same time.

Dogs learn through –

- Sound – Dog apply meaning to sound. A dog can be taught to come to you at the sound of a whistle for example. Because sound is important to dogs, think about your recall word and the tone that you use with it.
- Behavior and consequences – Without using any words a dog can be taught to return to you for a reward, if you make yourself absolutely without a doubt the best thing in his environment.
- Repetition – Recall training must be reinforced throughout the life of the dog. Failing to practice and reward the behavior you want can quickly lead the behavior to become extinct.
- Social and emotional learning – Our dogs learn from other dogs. This is clearly evident when you bring a new puppy into the home and watch him as he picks up behaviors of the existing dogs in the family. When training the recall with a dog while another dog is in the vicinity, the second dog may learn that the first dog's name means "come when you hear that word" if the dog is rewarded just as the other one is.

A word about emotions and feelings – we don't often think of these things when training our dogs but dogs do have big feelings, especially when off-leash. In this situation the dog is getting quite a bit of stimulation from the environment and may have trouble if your training advances too quickly. Some dogs have bigger emotions than others around things like approaching walkers, bicycles or other dogs, balls or toys, or even things like bunny poop they may encounter outside. We are able to help our dogs move through big feelings by "pattern" training them through games.

GAMES TO TEACH RECALL: Below you will find a number of games to use when doing recall training. Some are harder than others, so while you don't necessarily have to play them in the order given, we have generally tried to put the harder games last.

In playing some of these games you may wonder, "what in the heck does this have to do with recall?" Keep in mind that you are using the games to engage the dogs need for stimulation and build his value for YOU. Games are not used just when training. They should continue in some form throughout the dog's life. If that sounds like too much of a commitment for you then you are not ready for your dog to have a rock solid recall and should be prepared to always have him on a leash, including when in your own backyard if you want him to come inside when you are ready. Games can be played daily in about 30 seconds – really – so this should not be too much of a hardship for anyone.

Videos that demonstrate these games can be found on our website.

Give Me a Break – Requires treats and a pre-chosen location for you to return to. This could be a simple target that you place on the ground so that you consistently return to the same place.

- Place a treat on ground without any fanfare.
- Turn away and go back to your chosen location. Allow your dog to get the treat.



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- Use a clicker to mark when your dog returns to you, then walk back into the environment to place treat.
- Repeat, repeat, repeat!
- Begin to add distractions. A distraction can be anything you place in the environment. It could be a cone, or it could be sibling placed in a down stay nearby.
- Add distance. Consider your own abilities in doing this. If you go too far out you might not get to the appropriate location before your dog does.
- Add difficulty removing the mark you are using for your location and changing the distance and direction you are going to.

Scatter Game – You only need treats to do this game. Make sure that the treats can quickly and easily be seen by your dog on the surface you are using. For example, brown kibble type treats are hard for the dog to see in the grass. You don't want him disengaging from you and just searching for more. In contrast, small pieces of bright orange cheese are easy to see when you are on grass.

- The idea for this game is that you simply scatter a few treats on the ground. Not too many. Just 3-4 will do.
- The dog will naturally clean up and then look to you for more. He will likely return to your hand since that's where the scattered treats came from.
- Practice this several times without a cue.
- Add your recall cue the moment the dog's head comes up and give him a treat from your hand.
- Gradually increase the amount of time between when you treat the dog from your hand and when you scatter more treats.

Whiplash Turn – Treats are all that are needed for this game.

- Place a treat on ground.
- Move so that you are directly behind dog's tail.
- Say the dog's name.
- Mark with a clicker the moment the dog turns his head toward you.
- Give the treat with the dog in front of you or place it on the ground.
- Repeat the game multiple time and gradually fade out name cue.
- Practice in different contexts and environments.
- Fade out the placement of the treat or feeding in front of you and build to a point where you are tossing the cookie out and the dog is returning to you.

Take Two – Only treats are required for this game.

- With your dog behind you, place a treat on the ground right beside your foot.
- Immediately take two steps forward and stop.
- Mark with a clicker the moment your dog looks up at you from the treat. Then place another treat by your show and take two more steps forward.
- Repeat, Repeat, Repeat.
- For recall purposes, add distance and speed. By doing this exercise your dog learns to see your back as a cue to return to you. This could come in handy when doing off-leash hiking and allowing your dog to take in smells in the environment.



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Ping Pong – For this game you will need another person to help you. It's really fun for the dog if you use a group of people. Each person will need 3 treats in their hand.

- Have your helper call your dog.
- When the dog goes to the person, he/she crouches down and feeds the dog 3 treats.
- Then the person stands up and turns their back on the dog while someone else calls him.

Hand Touch Game – This game can be played with just yourself and some treats.

- Set up similar to the Take Two game as the dog is behind you.
- Walk away from the dog several feet.
- Put a treat in your hand and extend it down.
- Call your dog without turning your head.
- The dog should come to your palm to get the treat.
- Praise your dog and repeat the game.
- This game gives your dog the idea that you have eyes in the back of your head!

Food Chase – This game needs just yourself and some treats. The game is designed to build drive. When you call your dog you want him to come to you quickly, without lagging. The key is to keep the dog engaged with you and not with the environment.

- First toss a treat to the right.
- Once the dog lifts his head after eating the treat toss one to the left. Make sure that the dog can see the treats so that he stays engaged.
- Repeat, repeat, repeat. You want the dog to be moving quickly from side to side.
- Once the dog understands the game you can build it to a person chase. To do this toss the treat and when the dog lifts his head after getting it, run the other way so that your dog will chase you. Keep going until the dog catches you. Feed from your hand once the dog has reached your side. You don't have to run like a sprinter or even truly move fast. You just have to *appear* to be running fast by lowering your head and moving your arms.
- When doing a person chase, make sure that you don't turn to face your dog. This is a big signal for the dog to decelerate and is contradictory to building drive.

Restraint – This is a very simple game to build drive. While holding your dog's harness or collar, throw a treat down a few feet away. Hold on to the harness until you feel the dog pull, then release him to get the treat. This technique uses opposition reflex, the dog's natural instinct to pull in the opposite direction when pressure is applied (think about sledding, skijoring, weight pull), in a positive way to build drive.

Look At That – This is a more complex game than the ones above. You can start with distractions in your own home but will need to go to a place where you can find additional distractions, like a park.

- Start with a simple object like a cup or mug. Put the object behind your back. When you bring it out, your dog's natural prey drive will cause him to look at it. Mark the behavior immediately when he looks. We are teaching the dog that looking at a thing is a way to earn a reward.



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- Advance the game by placing the object to the side of the dog. Mark and reward when he looks at it. Once he is doing this consistently add the cue, “look at that.” Increase the difficulty with objects that are more challenging, like a cat.
- Open Bar/Closed Bar – For this you need an environment outside of your home and a helper. Your helper can have a dog with him if that’s appropriate for the situation. Have the helper, the distraction move within sight of you and your dog, with your dog on a leash. When the distraction approaches, the bar is open. You say, “look at that” and when the dog looks, you mark and reward. As the distraction moves away, the bar is closed. Repeat the process multiple times. Eventually, you will be able to have an off-leash dog that returns to you when a distraction approaches.
- When your dog is anticipating that an approaching distraction is an opportunity for reinforcement, mark him for looking at the thing, then reward the dog towards you. When your dog is doing this behavior regularly (pattern training), he is saying, “that thing over there, you owe me for looking at it” and we know we have made the behavior operant. If you are working with stationary objects out “in the wild” be sure to put them down as objects you will naturally encounter will not be in your hand.
- You can turn this technique into a conversation by using it to teach the names of things. It can be used to quiet a dog that barks at delivery trucks by teaching him that “look at the UPS man” earns him a treat. You can name people, things and other pets.
- This game can also be used to pattern train a dog away from the gross stuff. If you have a dog that you like to hike with but can’t be trusted off-leash because he likes to roll in (or worse, eat) deer poop, you can train him to return to you when he encounters it rather than rolling in it. Coming to you earns him a treat and maybe some playtime!

Disappearing Reward – For this game you’ll need treats, both high and low value, and a helper.

- Ask your dog to stay and move a few yards away from him. Have your helper stand midway between the two of you and slightly off to the side.
- Have the helper place a low value treat on the ground and then call the dog to you.
- If the dog goes toward the food, the helper simply covers it with her foot – no reprimand.
- Once the dog looks up from where the treat is covered, call him again. The most likely result is that he will come to you. When he does, mark the behavior and give him a higher value treat than is on the ground. You are teaching the dog that he must come to you when called no matter what temptation may be between you.
- Have the helper pick up the treat from the ground once the dog comes to you. With every repetition, the dog should see the helper place the treat on the ground.
- The dog learns quickly with just a few repetitions that he will never get the treat from the ground because it disappears and is never rewarding. He would rather come to you when called because that will always earn him a reward.

MAINTENANCE TRAINING: A recall only becomes rock solid when it is trained and reinforced for the life of the dog! The games detailed above can be played in very small units of time with little pre-planning. Since you are likely out with your dog anyway take time to play a game. You cannot expect to do recall training and then just drop it. Doing this will extinguish the behavior.



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Recall training is a commitment that you must make to your dog to keep him safe, happy and engaged. With time, you will have a dog that can go on off-leash adventures with you and you will notice that HE engages you with the training by returning to you when he sees a distraction.

Remember that a recall is so important that it ALWAYS deserves a reward!