

The Elusive Cue: COME

By Susan Carney

I think everyone I know wishes that their dog would come when called. But dogs don't and not only do we fear for the dogs' safety but we get angry and frustrated and wonder why the dog just doesn't listen.

First let me tell you that anger never works. Dogs are visual and use body language as their primary way of communication. When a dog looks at you, deciding whether or not to 'come,' they are taking in what you look like and what the outcome of the behavior will be. If you look angry they will not come, if every time they 'come' all the fun ends and there is no reward, they won't come and if your past behavior has shown them that 'come' doesn't always mean come, but that you chase them or again, get angry – once again, they will not come.

So, In order for 'come' to work we've got some work to do;

Ask yourself a few questions;

1. What is your definition of the command, 'come.'
2. Does your dog know what to do when they hear their name called out?
3. What do you expect when you use the word/ cue 'come'?
4. How much time have you spent training the behavior and getting your dog to do exactly what the definition is?

As humans we train a little and expect a lot. For whatever, reason we feel pretty strongly that dogs are stupid if they don't sit, stay or come. We think that practicing 'come' 7 times on a Saturday afternoon and then again two weeks later constitutes 100% knowledge of a command. Let me assure you it doesn't. It takes practice, patience and time to get *animals* to learn what *people* want.

With that in mind lets start from scratch, stop what your doing (cause it's not working) and lets retrain your dog *and you*.

Definitions:

COME - To advance toward the speaker or toward a specified place; approach: *Come to me*.

NAME - A word or words by which an entity is designated and distinguished from others.

The behavior you want:

When you hear the word or cue "Come" – advance towards me (all the way).

When you hear your name – turn and look at me, make contact, pay attention.

The method to use:

Positive reinforcement! If your dog does what you want you should always reward them.

Rewards are different for every dog, but generally all of the following;

- ✓ Food
- ✓ Attention / petting / a good butt scratch
- ✓ Verbal praise



- ✓ Freedom
- ✓ Play

Every dog loves the things on the list above but, for each dog the level of importance is different. Some dogs love food over all and others would rather play with a toy. Keep in mind what your dog holds dear and use that as your reward.

Building the foundation

The foundation for the behavior of -coming when called- is to first make sure your dog knows its name and will respond by looking at you. Dogs cannot respond if they are not paying attention.

Practice calling your dog/puppy by its name, and say, “good boy” and offer a treat as soon as they look at you and every time they look at you! If they don’t look at you immediately simply wait for them to and then reward. Avoid saying their name over and over again.

Remember, we are rewarding the movement of the head to turn and look at you. That is the first step. You will notice that your dog, once it sees you have something, will come to you to get it. It’s important that you don’t go to them. Hold out the treat and let them see it, they will come to get it. IF they don’t consider the treat / reward and maybe try something else that is a bit more irresistible.

Try this with a friend. Stand 6 feet apart (leash on your dog) and each of you take turns calling out the dogs name and watch your dog run back and forth between you for a treat...Try it with 3 or 4 people. Make a square. See your dog run and wag its tail, having fun while learning; my name is good, paying attention is good and yes eventually ‘come’ will be good to.

Next take this new game outside where there are distractions. Use a longer leash and continue calling your dog back and forth between a few people. Practice at least once a day and be sure the outcome is always rewarding to the dog, even if the behavior is not perfect.

If you are alone, toss a treat out and let your dog run off to get it (on leash of course). Show him/her another treat and as they return to you say, their name and “good dog.” Once they get to you, do not give them the treat but toss it out again so the game can continue. Your dog will think, “If I come back, you will toss the treat again, keeping the game going.” In order to get another treat I have to return, fetch and keep returning (coming)! What was once a chore is now starting to turn into a game (and a reward).

Adding the word Come

After about 2-3 days you can start using the word come (sooner if you practice a lot). But waiting a few days helps you to realize that dogs need a foundation and a good foundation takes time.

So, you have noticed that your dog is turning around every time you call them and coming to you to get the treat. Great! They are coming and having fun doing it.



Practice now with the word, COME – get the game started using your dogs name and then as they are trotting towards you add the word, “come, good dog.” Try to label the come as your dog is actually trotting towards you so they realized that the word goes with the behavior.

After a few days of this, its time to add more distance and more distraction. Keep your dog on a long line and go somewhere else: a pet store that allows pets, a long walk, and the beach. Try this same routine where the dog will be distracted by things that might also be on the list of rewards. Other dogs, squirrels, kids playing.

Here is where training fails. We never practice with distractions and temptations all around. Your dog is an animal first and that will never change. Squirrels, other dogs and great smells will always be very difficult to pass up unless the training has proven to be equally rewarding to the dog. Ask yourself; “Does your dog see you as a reward or the *ender of all fun and freedom?*”

Each day (if you practice and work through the tough parts) you will see your dog get better and better but remember, that training is never really over. Challenge your dog with new situations, new distractions and even fewer and fewer treats.

Your dog will test you and what you taught them. The minute you are inconsistent or change your behavior, they observe it and learn from it. So, if you have habits that you think contributed to the failure of your dogs ‘come’ command like; getting angry, chasing them, punishing them or repeating yourself, try to change *your* behavior. Positive reinforcement and every day life are great tools for training any dog to do any thing.

The NHSPCA offers one on one-behavior consultations at \$50 for the initial consult and then \$30 per hour after that. Call 603-772-2921 Ext 112 for more information.

