

The Fun Police

Why won't my dog come when I call?

By Laura Tyler

One day while I was walking my dog at a neighborhood park a loose dog came running up to us. He was totally full of himself, tongue hanging out the side of his mouth and his circling, waggy tail just couldn't quite keep up with his stride. I could see by his body language that he was friendly and "just wanted to say HI" but, I have a small dog who is easily intimidated by large slobbering wiggle warts.

I called to the guy walking him to please call his dog. (And then the fight started!) He yelled and then he threatened and when his dog finally went back the owner clobbered him, jerked him and put him back on the leash. As they passed by he apologized and said he just couldn't get his dog to come back once he's "distracted". Does this sound familiar? Here's the short answer: he shouldn't be off leash if he's not reliably coming back when called.

Having said that, how about a little help for this dilemma? Susan Freidman PhD. Psychology professor at University of Utah says, "If you want 100% compliance then you'd better be prepared to reinforce it 100% of the time." And I totally agree with this. A really reliable recall takes hundreds of successful repetitions. Success is built through reinforcement of the behavior you are training. Even though my dog is now seven years old, we practice recalls on every single walk. And I use high value reinforcers. I want to be able to trump the environment when the time comes. Remember; you get out what you put in. Just because your dog comes to you reliably in the house and yard, does not mean she will be reliable in all different environments with every type of distraction. This takes practice! Lots and lots of successful practice!

Here's another key point: When your dog finally shows up after you've repeatedly called and you punish him, you've just made things worse! He will be less likely complying the next time.

One more place to destroy a recall is at the dog park. Typically, people turn the dog loose then visit and talk with other park people until it's time to go. Calling your dog out of play and ending all the fun makes you the "fun police". After all that fun being a dog you just want him to stop? *Are you kidding?* This is another important reason your dog will not come when called. He knows the party is over. (Just like a kid being told to stop in the middle of a very cool video game.) *"Stop now? I can't believe you asked me that!?"*

If you take the time to practice your recalls in the back yard using high value food rewards prior to going to the dog park, you've just increased your chances for compliance. And if you turn your dog loose and immediately call him back, reward with high value treats and then say, "go play", he will be more likely to stop what he's doing and return to you again. See where we're going with this? You become a key player at the dog park, not just the Fun Police!

Build a solid investment in the behavior you want. That takes time, consistent training and reinforcement. Training time with your dog should be fun and rewarding for both of you.

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