

Underdog Training and Behaviour Consulting Teaching The Elusive- Reliable Recalls

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While most people prioritise teaching a reliable recall, many struggle with achieving success. Although a seemingly simple exercise, the recall can be the most difficult to teach- the good news is, it doesn't have to be any longer!

So why does teaching a recall seem more difficult than teaching other obedience exercises?

- The environment is too distracting for the dogs level of training
- The dog is provided with opportunities to self-reward
- Frustration and high levels of excitement are reinforced
- Lack of conditioning
- Dog desensitised to owners repeated commands
- Recall is expected but not taught to the dog
- Dogs are socialised in a way that develops a high value for other dogs
- Breed instincts not in line with a natural reliable recall
- Owner does not adjust techniques from last dog to new dog
- Limited access to off lead areas
- Less exercise provided than required
- Many people want it when they want it and they want it now!!

What is Classical Conditioning?

Classical conditioning is a pairing exercise where an initially neutral stimulus is paired with an unconditioned stimulus resulting in an automatic or reflexive response. So for example, when you pair a food bowl with food a number of times, the dog becomes excited at the presence of the food bowl- even if there is no food currently in it. Other examples include Pavlov's dog, a dog's reaction to a lead or negative associations such as the smell of a vet.

Why use classical conditioning for recalls?

The biggest advantage of using classical conditioning for recalls is that we condition an automatic, reflexive response. The biggest issue with traditional recall training is that when there was something better on offer, the dog would choose that in lieu of the lower level reward on offer. Classical conditioning negates that issue.

There are multiple people in my family- should we all do the training?

If you would like the dog to respond equally to all people in the family, everyone should do the training. Alternately, a generic transferrable sound like a whistle can also be used- while each family member will still need to do some practice, the same sound may reduce the number of repetitions needed by those people other than the main trainer.

What if my dog is not motivated by food or toys?

Every dog is motivated by food- they can't survive without it! However, for those dogs who are not motivated enough to want food additional to their meals, deprivation schedules can be used. Limiting access to resources will increase their value. Real drive rewards can also be used for some dogs- rabbit fur tugs, raccoons tails etc.- these are particularly beneficial for prey driven dogs who want to go chasing rabbits instead of returning to you!

Is my dog too old for this kind of training?

No dog is ever too old! However, if the dog has been practicing the behaviour for a long period of time, the conditioning process will take a little longer or require more repetitions than if you were to start with an 8 week old puppy.

Does this training work for all breeds?

YES, this training is not breed specific, however breeds that are bred to work independently of people can be more difficult and take more time or more repetitions to achieve reliability. Risk- reward ratio should be considered with some breeds though and we do recommend careful management of sighthounds due to their speed and potential injury if free running in an un-enclosed space.

What dogs cannot be taught a Reliable Recall?

While technically every dog can be taught a reliable recall, great care should be taken with dogs who have aggression issues or high predatory drives towards other dogs and cats.

What do I do if at the end of the conditioning process my dog is still not reliable?

The short answer is more conditioning!! However, in some cases where the length of time required would be prohibitive or impractical professional help should be sought to assist in the use of an electronic collar at a low level to proof the recall.

My dog has put themselves into some dangerous situations recently, is there a quicker way to teach a reliable recall?

Much depends on your dog and their level of motivation- while e collar training in some cases can speed up the process, it should only be used in addition to the conditioning program and under the direction of a professional that has deemed the dog suitable for such training. There is no magic wand for a reliable recall though- everything worth doing requires effort!

The 10 Step Program for Teaching the Elusive- Reliable Recalls

1. **Prevent** the dog from self-rewarding when running away. This may mean putting the dog on a long line in the park or walking the dog more on lead during the training process. Care should be taken to ensure the dogs exercise level does not decrease during this time.
2. **Find** the dog's motivator- food or a toy will generally be needed and both should be utilised where possible. Deprivation schedules may be needed to increase value for the motivator in the early stages of training.
3. **Choose** a recall word that has not been tainted before to use for the 100% reliable recall. The dog's name (or another word if you would prefer) will also be used for the training process. This method develops one informal recall (to be used regularly) and one formal recall (to be used less frequently) which is to be absolutely reliable.
4. **The Name Game-** Calling the dogs name ONCE only, when the dog makes eye contact, mark with either the word "yes" or a clicker and immediately food reward. This exercise should be repeated at least 25 times per day. For those wanting quicker or more reliable results, increase the number of repetitions of the exercise. Continue the Name Game throughout the remaining 6 steps of the Reliable Recall program but you may decrease the number of repetitions to 10 after the first 2 weeks.
5. **The Emergency Recall-** After a few days of the Name Game only start to condition the Emergency recall at home. Remember to use the word only once and deliver the reward regardless of what the dog does.
6. **Gradually increase** the level of distraction. Only move to a new level of distraction when the dog has done 5 repetitions where they immediately turned their head upon hearing their ER word.
7. **Start to move** locations in and around the home (particularly around the front door if the dog would tend to race out the door previously)
8. **Play hide and seek** within the house, using the ER once and providing the dog with a jackpot reward when they find you. Make it easy to begin with and gradually increase the level of difficulty- this encourages the dog to be persistent and builds frustration. Building frustration often helps to increase the speed of a recall. The faster the recall, the more reliable it is likely to be. Puppy in the Middle is also a valuable game to play with any dog learning to recall but does require 2 handlers.
9. **With the dog on lead** begin using the ER on walks and in other distracting situations. Remember to reinforce EVERY time the ER word is used. Jackpot rewards can be used for the exceptional responses from the dog.
10. **In outside environments**, begin to increase the distance away from the dog. When increasing distance, start with low level distractions and gradually increase. Distraction, duration and distance should be gradually increased- but care should be taken to separate these to start with.

Other factors that can assist the development of a reliable recall-

- Teaching loose lead walking
- Restrained recalls
- Agility
- Neutralisation (puppies)
- Play with your dog!
- Training in drive
- For dogs who already have a high value for other dogs- Allow play with other dogs in controlled environments without utilising a recall
- Restrict strangers rewarding your dog

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