

# Why Won't My Dog Come When Called?

by Pam Murphy

**W**ho left the gate open? Oh, no! Where's Jester? A quick dash to the front of the house, and you see Jester running gleefully across the street. All your shouts to stop and come are ignored. Prior experience says you will be spending the next hour or two chasing Jester. So you vow that you will definitely take Jester to obedience class.

Ask any dog obedience instructor what the two most common reasons are that bring people and their dogs to class, and you'll hear, "Walk nicely on a leash and come when called." Some people enroll as a last resort, believing there is something wrong with their dog because he or she runs across the street when off leash, and runs the other way whenever called or approached, starting the merry old chase.

Why don't our dogs always come when we call? The answer is fairly simple. We haven't taught them. Unfortunately, some people believe that obeying simple commands is a natural behavior, so when a dog ignores them, then they must have gotten a defective model, or the dog is deliberately defying them.

I have to confess that with my first dog some twenty years ago, I felt the same way. As a puppy, Max stayed with us off leash just fine, but as he got a little older, he would run everywhere to investigate anything new, and of course, would not come when called. I responded with indignant anger. That was probably about as silly as being upset with your five-year-old daughter because she can't read or sit still for more than three minutes. You must ask yourself, "Did I teach her to read? Is she physically and emotionally ready to read?"

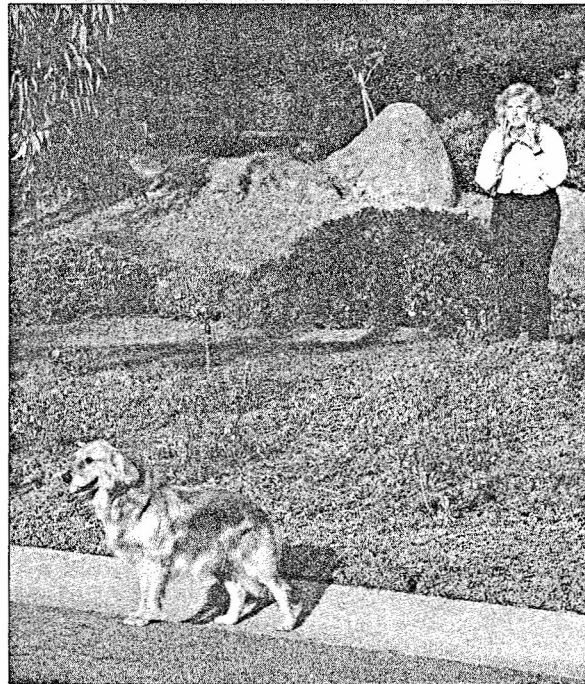
A dog is very much like a preschooler—lots of energy, limited concentration and a strong desire to

see and investigate all of life's wonders. If a dog were left exclusively in a dog pack, there would never be a problem. Dogs have a natural respect for the canine hierarchy system and understand their role and the rules in that pack. A dog or wolf in a wild pack has essentially unlimited space. They can run and investigate and jump on each other as much as they please. But, when the top dog decides it is time to leave, they follow willingly.

In contrast, when a domesticated dog lives in a human pack, the rules are changed, and the expected behavior is unnatural compared to that in a wild pack, such as requiring the dog to sit when greeting people, not jump on Granny or the kids, and eliminate only in designated areas. Our modern urbanized dogs are also confined to a very limited space around the house or yard, and often do not get the opportunity to run freely. The hierarchy system in a human family may also be unclear when consistent rules are not uniformly enforced by all members of the family.

Even 50 years ago, dogs had a more relaxed and comfortable life, and behavior problems were minimal compared to today's dogs. They lived on larger plots of land and encountered less and slower traffic in the streets. Today, it is much more hazardous for a dog to wander too far and not return promptly when called.

There will be normal times that a dog may be off leash near your home, back yard or local dog park. There will also be those unplanned off leash experiences when the door or gate was left ajar, and the dog goes exploring. In every case, we want to be able to call our dogs and trust that they will return—but consistently coming when called is not a natural behavior for a dog. Most dogs can learn to respect this com-



Golden Retriever, see "Who's That Dog?" page 13.  
Photo by Focus on Pets.

mand if a human teaches them carefully and patiently over a long period of time.

Dogs, like people, learn through a number of repetitions that something is either good and worthy of a repeat performance, or unpleasant and to be avoided. Once they have been conditioned through multiple repetitions to live politely in a human pack, they will earn more freedom. Trained dogs go on more walks because they walk nicely on leash. They enjoy the thrills of romping with their doggy friends at dog parks or beaches (where permitted) because they will come back when called.

People who believe their dogs are "trained" after one simple obedience course could be headed for disaster. Teaching and reinforcing what rules we expect our dogs to respect is a lifetime obligation. Courses only provide the tools to get started.

Kathy Lang, Director of Family Dog Training Center in Tukwila, Washington, had some helpful advice on obtaining reliable off leash control at her seminar at Texas Dogs Expo '96. First, she shows very young puppies, while they are still in their separation anxiety (the follow-you-everywhere) phase, that she could suddenly leave without any warning. Indoors, she may play hide and seek with 8- to 10-week-old puppies. Outside, she may take them to an enclosed area such as a tennis court or other fenced area that doesn't have dogs, and turn and walk away from them. When a puppy follows, she praises warmly. At this age, a puppy's insecurity about being left alone is greater than his or her desire to investigate.

Once a puppy's immunizations are complete, Lang will travel to parks or fields. The puppy is attached to a 40-foot-long line as soon as he or she is out of the car. After the pup has done the elimination ritual, Lang will drop the line and walk away without any warning. (The line is on for safety when in an open area.) Most puppies will think, "Where did she go? I better keep up with her." When the puppy runs to her, she joyously greets the puppy and gives a treat. This is done in as many different locations as she can find. After hundreds of repetitions, most dogs eventually learn that they must keep an eye on their person, because they are so unpredictable and may leave them. (Aban-

donment is one of the most potent punishments of all to a pack animal.)

Long lines can be made of nylon webbing or any type of sturdy cord or rope. The bolt snap that attaches the cord to the collar can be obtained at most hardware stores. Many pet stores now carry several varieties of long lines also. It is extremely important to never leave such a line on an unsupervised dog, and to make sure the bolt is securely attached to the rope.

Lang can also limit the perimeter where she wants the puppy to go by simply stepping on the long line whenever the safe boundary is reached. When the puppy feels the tightness of the long line and looks around, she only sees her handler smiling at her with a treat in hand, and will usually run back happily. (Those preferring not to use treats could divide a portion of the dog's regular food kibble into small bags and use that instead.)

Dogs who run away when they see you approach can be taught correct behavior by using the same long line. Lang steps on the line and, while not saying anything, walks toward the dog with her arm extended, holding a treat. When she reaches the dog, she gives the treat while taking hold of the collar. This is repeated multiple times. The dog is sometimes released to play, and other times a leash is attached for a few seconds and then removed. Repeated practice is needed to convince the dog that nothing negative will happen. Dogs soon recognize that the body language—approaching with your arm extended—means good things may be happening, and they won't run away. They must be specifically "taught" not to panic when you need to take hold of their collar. This will be important in those times when the dogs will not respond to a come command and you need to go get them. Repeating a come command multiple times as they keep running away simply trains dogs that "Come, Come, Come" means "Run, Run, Run."

To achieve improved off leash control, Lang recommends that the dogs continue to drag the long line while growing up (always under supervision), including playing ball or any other activities. Teaching a more consistent response to a come command is done by clear association with something positive every time

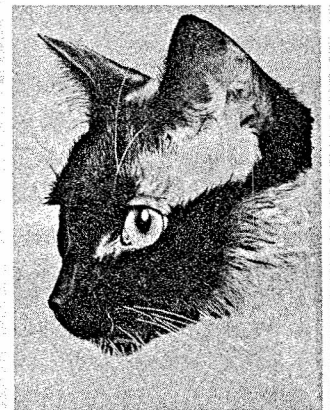


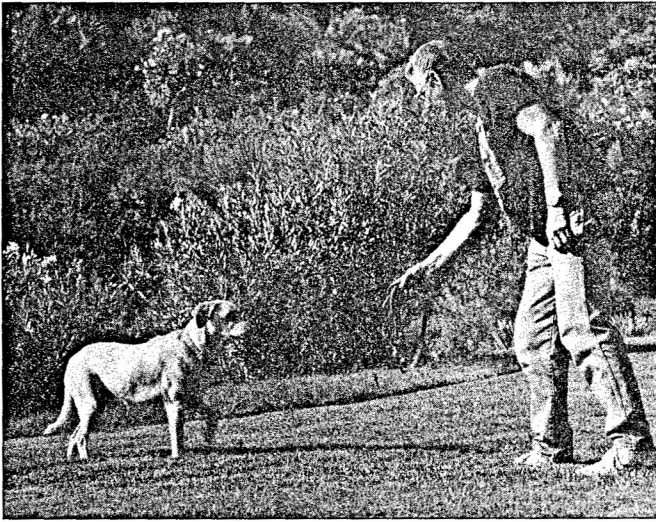
## Pet Portraits

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*Training with a long line is especially helpful if a dog panics when approached and ignores all commands, pleas and bribes to come. Labrador Retriever, see "Who's That Dog?" page 13. Photo by Focus on Pets.*

the dog comes (food, praise, or a toy). She also never uses the come command for anything the dog perceives as unpleasant, such as baths or nail clipping. When she does give a come command, she always ensures that she can enforce it, which is easily done by picking up the line and giving a little tug. The dogs must learn to respond to commands even under heavy distractions, such as other dogs, squealing kids or pesky squirrels. With the long line, she always has a means of reinforcing the command when the dog feels there are other options. Some dogs may require up to a year of training with the long line in many different locations and with heavy distractions before they are more reliable with off leash control. Unfortunately, there are a few dogs, because of other contributing factors, who may never be 100% reliable when off leash, particularly under very strong distracters such as bitches in season or an unexpected rabbit. Tragic results have been reported by overly confident owners whose dogs were killed by rapidly moving cars.

Lang, who also teaches competition obedience, asks all her competition students before they start off leash work, "Can you take your dog to a park, let him run off leash, and then call him back on one command? If not, then they have no business going into a Novice ring." She reminds those students that just because their dogs can reliably heel on leash does not mean they have off leash control. At dog shows including obedience competi-

tion, it is not unusual to see an occasional dog run away from a handler and run recklessly throughout all the rings with the handler and a dozen other exhibitors in hot pursuit. The dog panics when approached and ignores all commands, pleas, and bribes to come. Some of these dogs may have a high flight drive (see "Training People & Dogs in the 90's," *Southern California Dog Magazine* April 1996). Some may be extremely sound sensitive and may have been spooked by a generator or a canopy falling over. But, many were just not trained for off leash control.

Off leash control means that in any

strange environment with every reasonable level of distraction, your dog will willingly return on the first come command. Depending on their individual traits and personalities, a few dogs seem to learn this more quickly than others. Others might only achieve 85% reliability even after extended use of the long line. Some people may have been spoiled by having once had a dog who almost effortlessly learned off leash control. They were then disappointed and frustrated when their next dog was more like an average dog (needing more than an occasional reminder) and required specific and prolonged training.

A dog who has been taught good off leash control probably has few other major behavior problems because he or she has unwavering respect for the human pack member, whether child or adult. The peace of mind and pleasure of having an obedient dog are well worth the annoyances of the lengthy training necessary to yield a lifetime of devoted companionship.

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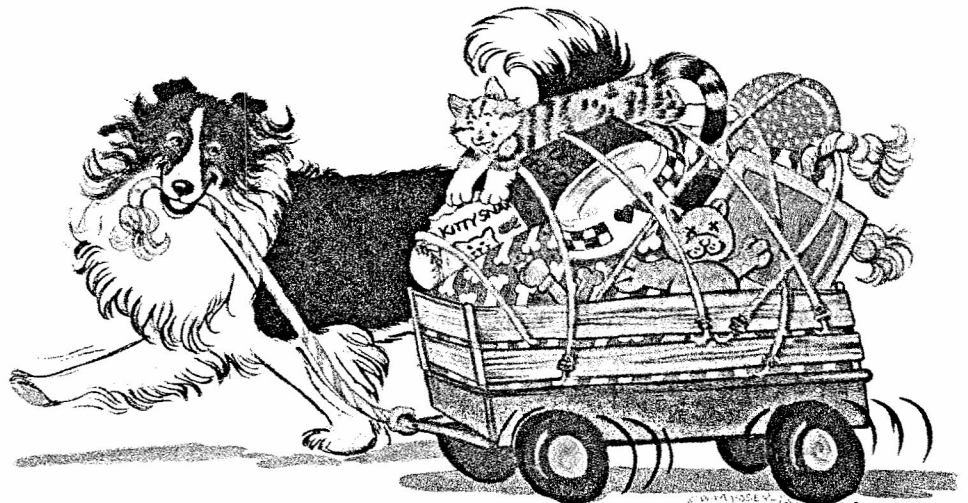
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