

Training as Enrichment: Basic Skills



Reward-based training improves the lives of dogs and their human families. You can “home school” your dog and improve their behavior by fitting the following training exercises into your everyday interactions with your dog.

1. The Name Game

Dogs don't automatically turn all attention to their human at the sound of their name unless they've been taught their name is positively significant and worth attending to. This is especially true if the dog's name has been overused or associated with scary circumstances previously (such as “Fluffy, get over here now!” or “Rover, stop that!”) The name game teaches dogs to happily move their focus to their humans at the sound of their name by pairing their name with plentiful positives.

- To play the name game, simply say the dog's name once, following up immediately with a tasty treat. Some dogs might instead prefer their favorite toy or getting out the leash to signal it's walk time.
- If the dog doesn't immediately engage, use attention getters like a high-pitched happy voice, inviting body language, crinkle of a treat bag, opening of the treat bin, etc., then try again.
- Play the name game at random throughout the day and especially right before high-value activities such as walks or immediately prior to mealtime.

2. Red Rover Canine Edition

Turn this childhood favorite into a ready recall in your real-life Rover. You can encourage a more reliable “come when called” through the use of happy excitement and high-value rewards.

- The game can be played with two or more players, each person armed with a stocked treat pouch or a handful of high-value treats.
- Play outdoors within a fenced yard or with the dog secured on a longline. Or play in larger open areas of the home where the dog has greater freedom to roam, such as a larger living room space or hallway.
- Start off with one person calling the dog to them, using the dog's name and a come when called cue such as “Otis, come!”, saying it only once to ensure it's significant to the dog. Follow up with inviting body language, like lowered body or turning slightly to the side, slightly patting the legs or the floor, and the accompaniment of verbal coaxers, like high-pitched calls and kissy sounds.





- If space allows, you can further the fun and build the dog's speedy response by adding in movement of the caller away from the dog once they're called. The person who calls can move away from the dog at a walking, jogging, or running pace. Once the dog catches up they can stop in place, rewarding Fido for the fast response.
- One person at a time can take turns calling the dog to them after the dog has successfully come to the prior caller and received their reward.
- Reinforce the dog's response of coming when they're called by rewarding with praise and immediate delivery of a high-value reward that's especially tasty, such as a tiny cubed piece of chicken breast or lean ham, before they're called back to the next person.
- Initially start with all participants close to the pooch as they're called. Gradually spread out to increase the distance the dog moves between people as they're called. You can increase the challenge as the dog demonstrates readiness to return to each person once called.
- Everyone but the current caller should largely ignore the dog and stand like a statue to minimize the distraction and increase the dog's interest in moving toward their caller.



3. Gotcha Game

- Further the usefulness of the Red Rover recall game by gradually accustoming your dog to having someone reach for and gently grab their collar.
- Many dogs come close enough when they're called to get their reward, but not close enough to be touched or caught by their collar, staying just out of reach or ducking and darting away if a hand reaches out to take hold of the collar. Due to underlying fear, the dog may react defensively if their collar is suddenly grabbed, unless they're positively familiarized to the situation before it happens in real life.
- The dog's avoidance furthers the difficulty in safely securing the dog in the chance they ever need to be quickly secured when running off leash.
- Add in a new element of reaching slightly toward, lightly touching, and eventually fully grabbing or clipping a leash to the collar before the dog is rewarded with a treat and then once again released to run free.
- Occasionally reaching for the collar during the Red Rover game helps to accustom the dog to the collar handling experience and makes it a familiar part of the recall game that's associated with ample rewards the dog enjoys.
- If the dog is showing avoidance or aggression, take things very slowly and/or consider seeking professional help.