

BowWOW!

Facts, observations and musings about Our Best Friends

COME is a Four Letter Word (part one)

Has this ever happened to you?

“Truman, come.” Truman looks away.

“Truman, come!” Truman sniffs his foot.

“Truman, COME.” Truman drifts into the neighbor’s yard.

“Truman, COME!!!”. Truman is gone.

Don’t worry. It happens all the time and it happens to every dog owner.

Come is perhaps the most important directive we can teach our dogs, perhaps the most difficult to teach correctly, but ironically, one of the exercises a dog learns most quickly.

Look at “come!” from a dog’s point of view. When you call Truman to come, he pauses for a split second and then considers “should I track that deer smell or go back to my person who sounds like she has an issue? should I roll in this pureed squirrel or...go home? should I eat this nice horse poo or run back and get yelled at?” In dog thought, the person loses every time. To make matters worse, if an angry tone has crept into the call, Truman begins to see “come” as a four-letter word.

Luckily, Truman falls into the category of house pet that has a close relationship with his owner and is a member of the family. They feed him, play with him, take him for adventures and when called, he’ll come sometimes, if he feels like it, which works most of the time. His owner will say “he *knows* what come means, but he’ll only do it if he wants to”. This is only partially true. He has learned from experience that he doesn’t *have* to come.

The trick is to convince Truman that “come” means “wonderful things are going to happen here!”. We want our dogs to think that “come” is the best thing in the world. We do this by teaching positive association with the come cue, by making sure that the consequences of “coming” are ALWAYS positive. We never punish Truman for coming and we never resort to threats or intimidation to make him come.

Here’s how it works: Start with a short distance recall in a low-distraction environment—the family room or the garage. Have a handful of treats that make Truman’s eyes light up, such as stinky cheese, or bits of chicken or beef. If Truman is a squeak-toy sort of guy, have a new squeak in hand. With Truman a few feet away, say his name in a cheerful tone. When he looks up in response to his name, run backwards several steps and say the word “come!”, also in an excruciatingly happy, cheery tone. The message you want to deliver is “we’re

having a party over here and you're invited!". Running backwards triggers a dog's chase instinct plus makes you much more interesting than if you were standing still.

As soon as Truman starts moving your direction say your reward word (Yes!, Good!) or squeak the squeak-mouse. As he approaches, stop moving and tell him what a great, smart princely beast he is and then treat him. When Truman is playing the short-distance come game, gradually start increasing the distance between you and Truman when you call him. Remember to mark the desired behavior—coming your direction—with the Yes! or squeak and encourage him to keep coming for his special food treat reward. Be sure to maintain the party atmosphere with lots of enthusiastic praise.

Next time: Round-Robin Come and Distractions

BowWOW! Is a production of Tracie Korol and wholeDog.
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