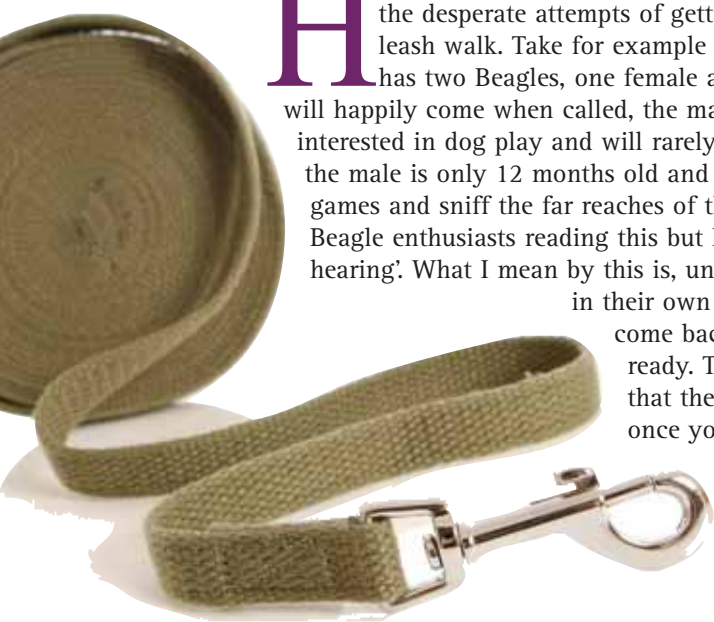


(Re)call of the Wild

Teaching this important training technique to your dog

Here's an all too common scenario that as a dog walker I see—the desperate attempts of getting your dog back after an off-leash walk. Take for example a guy in my neighbourhood. He has two Beagles, one female and a younger male. The female will happily come when called, the male, however seems to be more interested in dog play and will rarely come at the time of calling. Now the male is only 12 months old and is clearly happy to play social games and sniff the far reaches of the park—and dare I offend most Beagle enthusiasts reading this but Beagles by nature, have 'selective hearing'. What I mean by this is, unless trained, they do tend to be in their own little world and will seemingly come back to you when they're good and ready. The great thing about Beagles is that they're VERY food orientated and once you have the right training treat, they'll perform summersaults just to get a tasty morsel. The promise of a piece of BBQ chook means more to most dogs than the remote chance of finding possum poop.



I digress though so back to Beagle man and what I witnessed quite recently. After calling and calling his male Beagle (or MB as I'll refer to him) it became clear that MB was not going to come when called. Beagle man after shouting and calling, calling and shouting MB's name finally got exasperated and ran across the park, arms waving, sounding angry and almost crash tackled MB to the ground. He then proceeded to snap on the lead and it's at this point most frustrated dog owners round up their dogs and head out of the park for home. But in this case Beagle man took it further. I watched him roll his dog onto its back and shout loudly at it and even gave it a whack.

Common sense tells me why I wouldn't come back to Beagle man. The first is that his calling voice sounded stern and scary. Second is that he probably only calls his dogs when he wants to leave the park. Third—well come on wouldn't you dodge someone who was going to perform the ultimate injustice by rolling then whacking you.

For those dog park people who scratch their heads and wonder why it's so hard to get their dogs back, it really is very simple. The call back signals to your dog that fun time is over, a lead will be snapped on and you'll be hauled back home to probably spend the day on your own.

Another 'regular' in my dog park is a seriously unsocialised British Bulldog. Hilda is a lovely dog and really wants to make contact with other dogs. Unfortunately she's the product of not having been socialised as a youngster and when she sees other dogs she rushes over to them, snorting and coughing in anticipation and excitement. Unfortunately other dogs (and their owners) have interpreted this as aggression and Hilda has been excommunicated from the larger dog walking community. Her owners now walk her in a fenced park at times of the day where she's less likely to meet other dogs. Should a dog come into sight, her owners perform quite a well-rehearsed dance to distract her and get her back on a lead. Hilda's 'mum' calls her and coaxes her, while her 'dad' does a semi circle behind her, then comes in from the side to grab her collar and attach the leash. It's like watching African wild dogs distract, round up and then pounce on their prey.

Recall training is a vital tool to have in any situation and ideally should be taught at the puppy stage, however no dog is too old to be taught this skill. It's easier to teach at this stage as puppies have a very strong urge to follow their mother and her owner and will willingly transfer this to his new parent figures. However, all dogs, no matter at what stage of their lives, should be taught the recall skill.

Training begins at home

Don't try to start recall training in a busy park that's full of distractions. Instead instigate this at home, in a quiet place with no distractions. You'll need a few things—a happy 'party' voice; a friend to help you; tasty and soft training treats and a long leash—at least two metres long.

- Get your friend to sit on the floor the length of the leash away from you. Get your helper to hold puppy's collar and you hold the end of the leash.
- Now call your puppy by name or use "come here" or simply "come" and use this signal once. It helps to sound upbeat and happy. I call it the 'party voice' as you want it to sound like you're having a good time.
- Guide or pull puppy towards you until you can hold his collar. Give plenty of praise and a tasty treat. Swap roles with your helper and start all over again.

Practice this until he comes to you with very little need for any leash work but remember to keep the training sessions short and repeat every day.

Advanced training should then progress to the park whilst still on the leash when there are plenty of distractions with sights, sounds and smells. Still keep your helper at hand to assist with the back and forth training. Longer recall training leads that are lightweight can also be used. They're a little hard to find in standard pet supply stores but can be an invaluable tool when you're still training out in the park. Extra length means you can quickly step on the lead should pup head completely in the wrong direction.

More advanced training can begin in a fenced outdoor space—if you have the luxury of a backyard, then use this. These short happy recall sessions should be done without a lead and maybe upgrade the quality of treat to roast chicken or something equally special.

At home you can add some fun into the mix and play a game of call and seek. Arm yourself with treats and get your friend to hold onto pup while you race off into another room of your house. Call pup and as soon as you start calling your helper should release pup so he can hunt you down. Keep calling and once he finds you, treat and praise. All of these techniques can be reinforced with clicker training if you've been following this magazine's series on this.

It's a shame that I often see people fearful of ever letting their dog off a lead because they've grown afraid of the dog never returning. Another great reason to have your dog trust you to come on the recall is what I call the 'unknown quantity' which is a reference to other dogs that I don't know. I regularly practice recall even if we see dogs we do know and trust—it's something that has come in handy when I've had to dash home or been strapped for time.

Recall training is such a simple technique if patience, an upbeat attitude and smart practices are followed. It's important to make it a daily and random practice at the park and should never just be used when you're ready to snap on the lead and head for home.

Your voice and attitude speak volumes and if sounding stressed, angry or fearful, your dog is going to interpret this exactly as it comes out. So practice the 'party voice' and have a great time with your park pal.

Glamour
PETS

Designer Stainless Steel Bowls Melamine Bowls

Striped Ceramic Bowls Rubber Feeling Mats

Plush Throws Striped Beds

Sperling Enterprises, Sydney, Australia
www.sperling.com.au
Ph: 02 9821 1444 Fax: 02 9821 2641