

# Does Your Dog Instantly Obey These 3 Critical 'Life or Death' Commands?

Sure you want a well-mannered pet. But there's an even more compelling reason to teach these three commands to the point of instant obedience. They can truly mean the difference between life and death. Just be sure to keep these three special words in mind during every training session.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Every dog should receive basic behavior training, including learning how to respond to verbal commands such as "come," "drop it," and "down, stay"
- Many people don't realize that the ability to respond appropriately to certain verbal commands can literally mean the difference between life and death for a dog
- Dogs explore the world with their noses and mouths, and the things they sometimes pick up in their mouths can be hazardous to their health
- Your dog should be trained to reliably and properly respond to these three commands in particular, because they can be used to avert disaster and could even save your pet's life
- Training sessions with your dog should: Be fun (for both of you), involve only positive reinforcement of desired behaviors and should always end on a positive note

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Pet parents who provide positive reinforcement behavior training for their dogs typically do it with the goal of having a well-mannered pet.

What many people don't realize is that the ability to respond appropriately to certain verbal commands can literally mean the difference between life and death for a dog. These commands are:

- Come
- Drop it
- Down, stay

Ideally, your dog should learn to reliably and quickly respond to these commands every time you give them — no matter where you and your dog are, or what's going on around you. The following are tips and tricks for preparing your pet to react appropriately to these all-important verbal cues, but before we get started ...

When you're about to teach a new behavior or spend time reinforcing a recently-learned behavior with your four-legged family member, say these three words to yourself: Make it fun! Training should be an enjoyable experience for both you and your dog.

The key is to make your dog want to do the behavior rather than forcing him to do it, so use whatever will draw him into the "game." Make it seem like the two of you are about to have some fun by using your voice, playful body language, a treat, a toy, etc.

## Teaching the 'Come' Command

Dog guardians typically give the "come" command, also known as the recall command, when their canine companion is engaged in some activity she's enjoying. This is what often makes a "simple" command challenging to teach.

Dogtime.com offers three easy-to-follow rules for training your dog to come when you call:<sup>1</sup>

1. Only use the command when something good is about to happen to your dog — never when you're planning to do something to her that she won't enjoy.

If it's too late for that, in other words, if your dog has already learned that "come" can mean she's about to get scolded or some other distasteful thing is about to happen, then you'll need to choose another recall command. Many people choose "here" or "now."

2. Always use a cheerful tone of voice when you call your dog to come. In worst-case scenarios, keeping your voice sunny can be really hard to do.

But even if Buddy's bolting out the front door and into the street, it's very important not to convey panic or anger, as it may discourage him from returning to you.

3. Know when not to use the recall command. The goal is to give your dog lots of opportunities to succeed at coming when called. While she's still learning, you don't want to give a recall command when she's doing something fun and probably won't respond as you'd like.

In situations where your dog isn't likely to come when called, don't give her a chance to fail. Instead go to her, and snap her leash to her collar. Also, keep in mind that some breeds and breed mixes tend to block out the rest of the world when they're sniffing around outdoors.

Until your dog is reliably responding to recalls, don't assume she'll come when she's off-leash.

## 'Drop It'

If you have any experience with dogs, you probably know all too well how important it is to train your pet to "drop it" or "release" on command. Dogs explore the world with their noses and mouths, and the things they sometimes pick up in their mouths can be hazardous to their health.

That's why teaching the "drop it" command is so important. It's also a big benefit when you play fetch or other games with your dog. It's much easier to pick up that slimy tennis ball from the grass than it is to try to wrestle it from Max's frothy mouth.

For most dogs, the "drop it" command is easy to learn when taught the right way, which is to present your pet with a trade — the object in his mouth for the **treat** in your hand. About.com offers these "drop it" training steps:<sup>2</sup>

1. Hold one of your **dog's favorite toys** in your hand and tell her to "take it." If she's really jazzed about the toy, let her play with it for a couple of minutes before you start training, but make sure not to let her play so long she gets bored with it.
2. While your dog has the toy in her mouth, hold a treat up to her nose. As soon as she releases the toy, give her the treat.
3. Repeat the above actions as many times as it takes until your dog is responding reliably.
4. Now add the verbal command "drop it." Say it convincingly and clearly while holding the treat near her nose.
5. After several repetitions, hold the treat away from her nose, and gradually increase the distance if she continues to respond to the "drop it" command.
6. Now use the command without the treat, and praise your dog if she drops the toy.

## 'Down, Stay'

Imagine Buddy-the-bolter from the earlier example launches himself out the front door and actually makes it across the street. Giving him a "come" command to run back into traffic could invite disaster, which is why "down, stay" is also a critically important verbal cue dogs need to learn.

Buddy needs to respond right away to your "down, stay" command so that you can go to him, snap his leash to his collar and bring him safely back across the street. This command is also a must-have for large, friendly dogs that tend to greet everyone by jumping up on them.

**Search-and-rescue dogs** are also taught the command to keep them out of harm's way when they're working. However, holding still, while it may seem simple, presents quite a challenge for many dogs, especially puppies. Teaching the "down, stay" command:<sup>3</sup>

1. Find a familiar spot that presents no distractions for your dog. Keep her focused on you by standing directly in front of her. Give her your full attention and look her in the eye.
2. Give the "down" command and tempt her into position with a treat — but don't give it to her yet. The treat should be in contact with her nose as she lowers herself.
3. Once she's in the down position, give the "stay" command followed by a quick series of treats to prevent her from leaving the position.
4. Start with a five-second "stay" and then give a release command ("okay" is a popular release). The release should kick off a little celebration of its own, involving a toy reward. The idea is to teach your dog to associate treats and toys with "down, stay."
5. Gradually increase the length of the "down, stay" in two-second increments, and decrease the rewards to every few seconds. The goal is to teach her to respond reliably when no treats are involved.
6. Don't begin increasing the distance between you and your dog until she's consistent in close work. If she breaks her "down, stay" position as you increase the distance, just say "uh-oh" and turn your back while holding the treat. Give her a minute to make the cause-and-effect connection before you try again.

- 7. Gradually reduce both the treats and toys so that she receives them only intermittently when she responds appropriately.

If a training session with your dog isn't going well — let's say he isn't grasping a particular behavior you're trying to teach, or one or both of you gets frustrated, stop the lesson early and end on a positive note. It's important to finish with your dog feeling good, which will set him up for success next time.

**Sources and References**

[VetStreet May 4, 2016](#)

<sup>1</sup> [Dogtime.com](#)

<sup>2, 3</sup> [About.com \(Archived\)](#)

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