



Guide Dogs for the Blind

The Food Induced Recall (FIR)

It is easy to appreciate how important a reliable recall is to someone that is visually impaired; at any time, under many different circumstances, it may be necessary to call a guide dog and know that it will come. It can even be a safety matter for both dog and handler. “Come” may be the most important cue a GDB puppy will learn. A step-by-step approach in teaching this cue will be most successful and will also help in avoiding ‘keep away’ issues as the pup matures.

Goal Behavior

The puppy will reliably and happily go directly to the handler when called, even with distractions. The puppy should come close enough for the handler to hold the collar, and it is desirable for the puppy to gently touch (but not crash into or jump on) the handler.

Prerequisites

The puppy should be familiar with food reward games and should be comfortable walking on leash.

Equipment

- Flat collar. These games are never practiced on a headcollar.
- Six foot leash initially. Long lines and draglines later.
- Bait bag that can be attached at the handler’s waist.
- A portion of the puppy’s regular kibble.

NOTE: The recall is not practiced from a “wait” or “stay” position. The pup is called while otherwise distracted or being held by a second handler.

General Tips for a Consistent Recall

The handler should:

- Use a pleasant and friendly tone of voice when calling the pup
- Praise enthusiastically as the pup moves toward the handler
- Move calmly and slowly when approaching the puppy
- Reach for the puppy’s collar and praise every time it approaches the handler. This conditions the puppy to expect a hand reaching towards it and creates a positive association with an outstretched hand
- Have a couple of pieces of kibble handy at all times (either in the pocket or in a stash on a table) to reward the puppy for responding around the home and yard even when not working on recalls formally

The handler should not:

- Call the puppy to correct or discipline it
- Run after, lunge for or grab at the puppy
- Call the puppy to do something it may not enjoy, such as baths or nail clipping
- Bribe the puppy by waving food at it
- Call the puppy when there is a high probability it will not respond

Raisers should not use the word ‘Come’ unless the puppy is coming to the handler anyway, or the leash or line is attached to cause the pup to respond to the cue. For daily off-leash handling of the puppy, its name, ‘puppy, puppy’, ‘this way’ or other motivational words can be used to get the pup’s attention. Until the puppy

has completed all the steps successfully, the come response is trained only when it is on leash or a line and the handler is prepared with food rewards.

Use of Food in the Recall

- The marker will not be used when teaching the recall. Verbal and physical praise (petting) should be given just before the food reward is offered. These secondary reinforcers will be associated with the food reward.
- While practicing the games a bait bag should be worn for ease of access. Digging around in pockets delays the reward.
- The food reward is given from one hand while the other hand holds the puppy's collar. As the food is brought to the puppy's mouth the collar must be held onto. This prevents the puppy from leaving as soon as it receives the food and also prevents the pup from getting dropped food off the floor.
- The food reward is held between the handler's legs, at knee level or lower depending on the size of the puppy, so that the pup must put its head through the handler's legs to reach the food. This encourages the puppy to make body contact and makes it easy for the raiser to grasp its collar.

Steps for the On-Leash Recall

Phase 1

This game should be practiced at least twice a day for approximately 5 days. In this phase the food is used as a lure. It is important to dispense with the lure technique as soon as possible and move on to phase 2.

Most puppies will move through this first step quickly and easily.

- The puppy should be on-leash. At first the puppy may be called from just half a leash length away.
- The raiser should have a piece of kibble ready in the hand.
- In a quiet area with no distractions the puppy should be allowed to wander and its attention to drift. The raiser should say the puppy's name and give the cue "come" in a happy tone of voice.
- Praise should be given as soon as the puppy turns to come to the handler. If the pup does not respond immediately it should be lured toward the handler with the food held close to its muzzle.
- The handler backing away from the puppy, while praising enthusiastically, will encourage the pup to keep moving toward the handler.
- The handler should continue to praise as the pup gets close. A piece of kibble should be held in front of the pup's nose to draw the pup between the handler's ankles or knees, depending on the size of the puppy. The handler should calmly grasp the puppy's collar as it eats the reward, petting with the other hand.
- The puppy may be released from the exercise with an 'OK', and allowed to drift away again.
- The game should be practiced several times but not to the point of tiring the puppy – it should be fun!

Phase 2

The puppy now understands it is going to get a food reward for responding to the verbal cue 'come'. In future practice, the handler should pet the puppy for a count of ten seconds before reaching into the bait bag and giving the pup a piece of kibble. The verbal and physical praise will be reinforced with the food reward.

- The puppy should be called with its name and the cue 'come'.
- The pup should be gently guided toward the handler with the leash if it does not respond.
- Verbal praise should be given as soon as the puppy responds; the handler should walk backwards encouraging the pup to follow.
- The handler should calmly take hold of the pup's collar with one hand and pet the puppy with the other hand for ten seconds, continuing to verbally praise the puppy.
- After ten seconds of petting, the handler should keep hold of the collar with one hand and give the puppy a food reward by reaching into the bait bag and lowering one kibble to be offered between the knees. When the pup finishes the kibble it may be released to explore at the end of the leash with an 'OK'.
- As the puppy becomes familiar with the game, minor distractions may be added.
- When the puppy responds reliably (no leash guidance needed) on-leash with minor distractions, more distracting situations may be provided. If the puppy has difficulty bringing its attention back to the handler, then the situation may be too difficult and the level of distraction may need to be reduced to allow the puppy to be successful.

Two-handler Come

This is a fun game involving two handlers. It is done on-leash/line with the handlers about six to ten feet apart. Both handlers should have a supply of kibble in a bait bag attached behind their backs.

- Handler A should hold the puppy on the ground, facing Handler B. Handler A should not pay any attention to the pup; Handler B holds the leash.
- Handler B calls the puppy as described in the 'on-leash recall'. When the puppy gets to Handler B it is given a food reward in the manner described above in phase 2.
- The leash is quietly handed to Handler A as the puppy is being praised and petted by the person who called it. After praising and rewarding the puppy for coming, Handler B becomes calm and uninteresting to the puppy thus making it easier for Handler A to get the puppy's attention.
- Handler B stops the praise and play and faces the puppy toward Handler A.
- Handler A then calls the puppy, repeating the exercise. Four or five repetitions are sufficient.
- As the puppy progresses, the handler holding the puppy does not need to face the puppy towards the other handler, and may eventually keep playing with the puppy as a distraction.
- As in the on-leash recall, if the puppy fails to respond to the cue 'come' it should be guided by the leash to the person who called it.
- The puppy should be allowed time to be adequately praised by each person participating in the exercise.

Review

At this point in training the 'come' cue the food is never visible to the puppy when it is called. The puppy should be called, praised and held by the collar in front of the handler, as close as possible, while the handler takes out a piece of food. The food is offered between the handler's knees.

If the puppy is relying on the leash to guide it in and not responding to the voice cue alone, the handling should be evaluated:

- Is the situation too distracting and not fair to the puppy?
- Is the handler's voice tone wrong or perhaps there is a lack of verbal praise?
- Is the kibble not motivating to the puppy, perhaps it would respond better to a toy reward or higher value food? (Only a CFR can recommend high value food.)
- Perhaps the puppy is ready for more of a quick tug on the leash than a gentle guide. If the raiser is sure the puppy understands what is required, and the situation is not too difficult, a leash correction may be warranted but should always be followed with lots of praise and a food reward.

Sometimes, when the puppy has worked through a particularly challenging training session, perhaps being called away from an exceptionally hard distraction, the pup deserves a 'jackpot'. A jackpot reward is multiple pieces of kibble given all at once and is a huge motivator. Five to six pieces of kibble are sufficient for a jackpot. The jackpot should not be overused or it will lose its value to the puppy. The jackpot reward should be reserved for those special times when the pup really deserves it.

Long-line Recall

This game should be started only when the puppy does a reliable on-leash recall, with distractions, by moving toward the handler on the first cue without needing any leash guidance. Raisers who are not familiar with the use of a long-line should receive instruction from their leader before attempting this exercise. The long-line should be 12 to 25 feet in length. It may be a lightweight rope, nylon-leash material, or a retractable leash designed for this purpose. When using some types of rope or leash material, it may be advisable to use gloves to prevent a rope burn.

- In an area with no distractions, the puppy should be allowed to wander and its attention to drift. Too much slack in the line will cause the raiser to lose control of the puppy.
- When the puppy is no longer paying attention to the handler, its name and the cue "come" should be called one time only in a happy tone of voice.
- Enthusiastic verbal praise should be given as the puppy moves toward the handler. Backing away from the puppy will encourage it to move toward the handler and will also make it easier for the handler to gather the long-line. Once it reaches the handler, the collar should be held and the pup praised and petted for a count of ten seconds. The food reward should be given as above and the pup released with an 'OK' when the handler is ready.

- If the puppy does not respond to the command, or if it responds initially and then loses focus and drifts away, the pup should be guided in with the line. To accomplish this, the handler must reel in excess line as the puppy approaches. (A 'Flexi-lead' retractable leash will do this automatically.) As the puppy focuses on the handler and moves in the handler's direction, verbal praise should be given.
- When the puppy reaches the handler, the exercise should be completed as with the on-leash recall.
- When the puppy is consistently responding and coming all the way to the handler with no guidance on the line, minor distractions may be introduced. As the puppy succeeds with minor distractions, the level of distraction may be gradually increased.

Transition to Off-Leash Recall - Draglines

After weeks of consistent responses on the long line, without needing guidance on the line, the puppy is ready for the next step. If the puppy still needs the line to guide it in more practice is needed. Only puppies responding immediately to the verbal cue to come should be transitioned to the dragline.

- The transition from an on-leash/line recall must be done gradually. If the leash or line is taken off too soon the pup will quickly realize it does not have to respond to the handler. This can lead to bad habits, like games of 'keep-away'. Even while having some free time in the back yard the pup should have a dragline on, so that the handler can take hold of it before calling it. By not allowing mistakes to happen, the puppy is made successful.
- In a safe, enclosed area, the long-line should be dropped, letting the pup drag it. The pup should be called to the handler in a happy tone and praised immediately when it starts toward the handler. The handler should not step toward the puppy but back away and encourage the pup to come to the handler. When the pup reaches the handler, its collar should be grasped and it should be rewarded with praise and food as above.
- If the puppy does not respond to the handler's cue, the handler should quietly and smoothly pick up the line and guide the pup in.
- If the puppy is not coming when called with the line dragging, it may need more practice with the hand-held line or there may be too many distractions, making the situation too difficult for the pup's level of training. Sometimes a distraction is more interesting to the puppy than the food, so the handler may have to go back to the hand-held line and work harder to keep the pup's interest.
- When the puppy is coming every single time it is called while dragging the long-line, without needing physical guidance, it can be transitioned to a shorter dragline. (The handler may just want to cut off a portion of the long-line to make it shorter, or have several lines of varying lengths available.)
- Over a period of weeks, the attached line is gradually shortened until it is just a 'tab' or handle, hanging from the pup's collar.
- The handler should not hesitate to go back to a longer, hand-held line and do more practice if the puppy is not responding consistently to the cue. The puppy must be conditioned to respond correctly with gradually increased distraction. The line will enable the handler to enforce the cue and the praise and food rewards will keep the puppy motivated.
- If at any time the puppy shows signs of playing 'keep away' the raiser should consult with their leader.

Off-leash Recall

Calling the puppy without any kind of line should not begin until the puppy comes when called with just a shortened dragline or tab attached to its collar. The pup must be responding to the first cue, without guidance, even with distractions. If the pup is not doing this it needs more practice on the long-line and dragline.

It is better that the pup arrives for guide training never having been off a long-line than it be allowed to practice ignoring the cue or playing keep-away. If the puppy is not progressing the leader should be consulted.

- Off-leash recalls should be started in a small, escape-proof, confined area (such as an exercise pen) or room with no distractions. The room should be free of obstacles and small enough so that the puppy cannot avoid the handler. The puppy should be allowed to wander and become interested in something.
- When the puppy is called it is expected to respond to the cue immediately. When the puppy moves toward the handler it should be praised for its good decision. Once the puppy reaches the handler the collar should be grasped and it should be rewarded as above.

- If the puppy does not respond within one second to the cue, the handler should not repeat the cue. The handler should walk calmly and slowly toward the puppy. When the handler reaches the puppy, the collar should be taken hold of. The handler should say “Come!” hold the collar and walk backwards to the area where the handler first called the puppy. The puppy should be verbally praised as the handler walks backwards. When the handler reaches the area where the pup was originally called it should be petted for ten seconds but no food reward should be given.
- The exercise should be repeated but made easier for the pup to give it a chance to succeed.
- It is important that the handler not rush toward the puppy or grab at the collar. Rushing or lunging towards the puppy will usually have one of two effects: the puppy will become worried or threatened by the handler, or, the puppy will initiate the keep-away game. Both of these are undesirable responses. If the puppy avoids the handler or plays keep-away as the handler approaches, a calm, cheerful demeanor along with a slow, deliberate approach is best. No matter how long it takes to get hold of the puppy's collar, praise is necessary when the handler does touch the collar. Obviously keeping the training area small makes this exercise easier.
- Handlers should never use a corrective, angry or threatening tone of voice when training this exercise (no matter how exasperated the handler may be!) Harsh commands will discourage the puppy.
- At the first indication that the pup is about to move toward the handler, it should be praised enthusiastically as the handler moves away from the puppy drawing it toward them.
- If the handler does not achieve success after two attempts, the long-line technique should be utilized for a while longer.
- Once the puppy is consistently coming when called, distraction levels and room or enclosure size can be gradually increased.
- Recalls should be practiced frequently. The handler should reinforce the puppy with food rewards for the recall throughout the time it is with the handler.

Summary

A reliable recall response is a vital part of a GDB pup's training. Raisers can succeed in teaching this cue with patient, calm, and consistent handling technique. Throughout the puppy's maturation, there will be times that the recall cue may seem to wane in its effectiveness. When a puppy fails to respond under conditions where it had previously been consistent, the pup may need to go back to remedial leash or line work. We would prefer that the off-leash recall is not attempted at all rather than have a dog come in for formal training playing keep-away. Fortunately food rewards are a great motivator and most puppies will enjoy playing recall games.