

Getting Your Puppy to Come Back

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Last month we discussed building retrieving desire, the single most important objective of puppy work. In this column we give another important tip on maximizing a pup's focus and motivation, and discuss an issue which comes up with almost all good puppies: how to get the pup to come back to you.

When you throw marks for your puppy, it is very important that you restrain it. Restraining a puppy as retrieves are thrown does a lot to build desire and eagerness. If you throw while it is loose "at large" it will not focus or mark nearly so well. At the other extreme, trying to teach a young pup to be steady will harm its confidence or make it quit retrieving altogether. A young pup may be easily restrained with a hand in front of its chest.

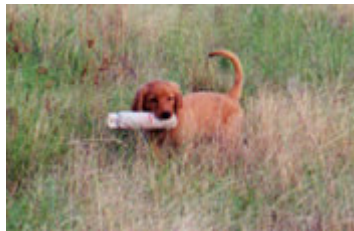


Very young puppies usually come straight back.

As your puppy gets bigger, switch to holding it back by the collar until the dummy is nearly on the ground. You may need to use your other hand on your puppy's rear to hold it still in the "sit" position. If this fails to stop your pup from jumping so wildly that it does not mark the falls, you may need to do some early steadying work. The wildly flailing pup has convinced itself that it needs to flail in order to get away from you to make the retrieve. You don't want to punish it, only to teach it that flailing is counterproductive. Usually if you quietly tell it to "sit" and refuse to release it until it does, your puppy will learn in a few repetitions that sitting still gets it what it wants. If this fails, we recommend standing on the end of your pup's check cord, with maybe two feet of slack (make sure it will not foul your puppy's feet), telling it to "sit" as you throw, and making it come back to your side and sit before you release it. Go back to collar restraint as soon as your pup is watching its marks.

"How can I get my puppy to come back to me on retrieves?" is probably the most often-asked question in retriever work. While usually the asker is looking for a short simple answer, in fact getting puppies to come back is an ongoing challenge that lasts up to the age of six months and beyond. Most good retriever puppies want to hang on to the retrieve object, especially if it is a bird, and sooner or later get the idea of not bringing it back to you. A pup may head the other

way with the dummy in its mouth, dance around out of reach, or lie down with a possessive paw over the dummy (and possibly chew on it). Don't get angry; this is a good sign, and perfectly normal. It will, however, require patience and ingenuity to work through the not-coming-back stage.



"Sooner or later most puppies think of keeping the dummy."

For little puppies who want to run away, hallway retrieves work well. If you throw the retrieve object down a hallway, there is nowhere to go but back to you. Sometimes it is necessary to sit to one side of the hallway, making it look as though your pup has an opportunity to run past you into the living room, in order to get the puppy to come your way. Of course, you can reach out at the last minute and capture the pup. If your puppy holds on to the dummy, pet and praise it for a moment before taking the dummy from its mouth, in the hope that it won't equate returning with having its prize snatched away.

Most puppies should not be trained forcibly to return before they are about six months old—the cost to their confidence and initiative, and that all-important desire, is too great. Instead, just engineer a way to get your puppy back. There are a variety of approaches to try. Sometimes kneeling down, arms wide apart, is enough to attract a puppy. Praising your pup in an excited tone of voice, clapping your hands, and backing away (or even turning and looking over your shoulder as you move away) will often get a young "chewer" to pick up the dummy and run to you. It helps to establish, in separate sessions, that when you call your pup in an excited tone of voice, it can get praise, attention, and/or treats by coming to you.

As your puppy gets older and bigger, you will want to work outside and try to extend its range, introduce it to different types of cover, etc. It may require more effort to get a puppy back to you outdoors, but there are a number of strategies, which work in various combinations. Young pups, up to about three months and sometimes more, usually have a particular place they want to go to, and if you get between them and it, you can catch them (especially if they are dragging a check cord). They tend to head for familiar territory. Out in the field, typically they want to go under the car or truck, so always throw out away from the vehicle. In such an unfamiliar place, longer falls tend to produce a greater inclination to come back.

At home, if you are so fortunate as to have part of your yard fenced near the house, stand by the open gate and throw out away from it. Almost all pups in this situation will head back for the gate, although as your pup gets older and smarter you may need to stand far enough to one side for it to think it can dart past you. If you don't have a gate, you can try the "head 'him off at the pass" technique. While any move toward the pup may trigger a game of keep-away, running on an intercept course doesn't seem to—and often you can get away with this ruse for weeks before your pup figures it out. Avoid chasing your pup; if it gets out of reach, use a combination of

pretending to ignore it and stealth. Dogs love to play "keep away" and you don't want your pup to think it can play it with you.

As your pup gets older, faster, and smarter, and you are working on longer retrieves, sooner or later you will need a new tactic. If it is warm enough for water work (so that the water is 60 degrees or more and the air is warm), practice retrieves straight out into the water. Almost all retrievers swim straight back to shore before trying to head in another direction. If you meet your puppy at the water's edge, before it has a chance to duck away, you may get your feet wet but you will also be able to get the dummy from its mouth before it can shake, preventing the bad habit of dropping dummies. Retrieving from cover has almost the same effect, as retrieving from water, except the puppy won't need to shake. Puppies tend to head straight back out of the cover towards you. The throw may need to be shortened so the pup can find the dummy or bird easily, and need to be straight into the area of cover, not angled. If you live in an area where foxtails or other grass awns are a problem, you need to be aware that getting one of these up its nose can be fatal to a dog, so do not send your puppy into an area where it will have to hunt among them.



"In the water he thinks about the shortest route back to shore."

For land retrieves in medium-short cover, you may need to use a long check cord. We have a 100-foot check cord we use with committed "runners." We keep throws within this distance, and take up the slack as the puppy returns. Usually this requires backing up to keep the puppy's feet from fouling the cord—a very awkward procedure at first but one most people can learn with practice. We use braided polypropylene for these cords. If coiled properly, it resists tangling; it floats and does not fray or rot.

While you can certainly introduce the "here" command with a young pup and practice it in a controlled situation, we recommend that you wait until after the pup is six months old to insist on total reliability. Never command "here" on a retrieve before your pup is reliable, because if it does not come you are in a no-win situation: you must either allow the pup to disregard the "here" command, or you must enforce the command in a way which will punish your puppy for retrieving. Either way you undo a lot of careful work.

We have presented a variety of tactics for getting a puppy to return on a retrieve, all of which we use regularly. In combination they should work with almost any retriever pup well enough to enable you to continue its retrieving work, and building up its all-important retrieve desire until it is old enough to be taught to come reliably when called. Next month we will continue with puppy training, and discuss introduction to birds, water, gunfire, and other aspects of adult retriever work.