

Training a Whistle Recall

Teaching your dog to respond to a whistle has several advantages over relying on your voice alone.

- The sound of a whistle carries further than your voice, especially in windy conditions.
- A whistle does not convey emotion e.g. frustration, anger, fear.
- A whistle is transferable between handlers, ensuring the dog returns to whoever is walking him/her.

Dogs do not respond automatically but need to be “tuned in”. The earlier you start the better, but it can be introduced at any age. Guide Dogs for the Blind introduce whistle feeding from six weeks of age!

How to “tune in” your dog.

- Get organised! You will need your dog’s food in a bowl, a whistle, and your dog, wearing a collar.
- Have your whistle around your neck.
- Get your dog to sit; most sit automatically if you raise the food bowl above their head.
- Put a finger in your dog’s collar for control.
- Put the food bowl on the floor telling your dog to “leave”.
- Get the dog to wait a couple of seconds, control with the collar as necessary.
- Blow the whistle, 3 short, sharp blasts.
- Release your dog’s collar to allow them to eat.

You need to practise this at **each meal for at least a week** to form the whistle/food association.

You can then build up to using the whistle to call the dog to you in the house. Have another family member hold the dog, show the dog a nice food treat and walk away from the dog a short way. Use the same whistle signal as at feed time, the helper releases the dog, you reward the dog when he/she returns to you. As the dog gets the idea, ask for a sit on their return and take the collar before giving the treat (this ensures they don’t return, grab treat and shoot off again!). You can now go out of sight and call the dog, to make the exercise harder, and build up to practising in the garden to build up the distraction level.

When the dog is responding reliably, don’t give a food treat every time. This will keep the dog guessing, it’s like gambling - you never know when it will pay off, so is always worth trying.

When the dog is reliable in the garden you are ready to practise out on walks.

Some do’s and don’ts

- Do always remember to take your whistle and some treats, attach the whistle to a key ring or even your lead, so you remember it.
- Vary your walks; dogs become very complacent if they know the exact pattern of each walk.
- Interact with your dog, take a toy (ball on rope, tuggy toy), play hide and seek, make sudden changes of direction. All these help to keep the dog’s interest on you; otherwise they will look to the environment for their entertainment!
- Walk with a friend if their dog has a good recall response, your dog will learn from their example.
- Don’t call your dog the minute you have let him off, give him time to let off some steam.
- Don’t call your dog if he is just about to go to the loo (would you respond?).
- Don’t call your dog if you know he is likely to ignore you, i.e. just started playing with another dog. You want to aim for successes at first.
- You will find your dog reacts better in some places than others. If you are finding it difficult in a particular place avoid it for a few weeks, practise in some easier areas and return as the dog becomes more reliable.

Never tell your dog off for a slow return, however annoyed you may be. If you shout or smack your dog on their return he will simply learn to avoid you.