

THUNDER COME!

By Mindy Jarvis ABC – CPDT
Dog Trainer & Behavior Consultant

I was coming out of my house the other day, and I noticed my neighbor Angela calling for her dog, “Thunder, Thunder, come here Thunder!” Thunder did not respond. She tried again with a whistle and some lip kissing. Thunder did not respond. She got angry and mean, “THUNDER COME HERE NOW! Thunder did not respond, she softened up, “Thunder over here”. Still Thunder did not come. Finally she shut the door and left Thunder outside. Thunder is a 10 year old Rat Terrier mix, who has been allowed to run free every morning for years. As Thunder roamed and marked, I said “Thunder COME” and he immediately walked over to me to get a yummy treat. I picked him up, and took him to his home, knocked on the door. Angela is always amazed at how I am able to get Thunder to come to me. “You are truly a Dog Whisperer!” she always tells me. I respond with “No Angela, I truly am not – your dog is totally treat motivated. Let me know when you want me to help you with this problem.” She always tells me she does not have time, as she scolds him for being such a bad boy, and then we both go on about our day. But one day, upon returning home from dropping the kids off at school, I pulled up to find that Thunder was being hauled away by the dog catcher. Angela was in tears begging with him to not take Thunder, but the dog catcher had already put him in his truck and continued to fill out the ticket for running at large. I assured her that although it would be a hefty fee, and an inconvenience to get him back, he would be fine. Later that night I got a knock on my door. It was Angela, “Can you teach me how to make Thunder come when I call him?”

Come when called is one of the most important commands you can teach your dog. In Angela’s case, she was lucky that the only thing that happened to Thunder was the dog catcher. We want our dogs to COME when we call them, but often times we fail to teach them the command and/or we allow them to get away with not coming. Then there are those folks who really get angry when their dogs don’t come, they chase them around the neighborhood for an hour, and then harshly punish them physically or mentally. They are angry, mean, and scary. Not coming to someone like that is what I call smart!

When I teach the COME command, I literally teach it in 6 weeks and teach it in fun games that will keep both the dog and the owner having fun. The key to having a dog COME when called is to have a lot of fun with it, do it in many different contexts, and if you call them away from something, release them to go right back to it as an additional reward.

The first problem I address with Angela was allowing Thunder to roam free, this had to stop. I would eventually allow her to let him out of the front door on a long drag line, so that when he did not respond to her calls, she could gently reel him in, but that was not for a few weeks. The next problem is she was not teaching him anything. She said his name, she said COME HERE, she said COME, she made kissy noises, she whistled, and then she gave up and went back inside. None of this had any meaning to him what so ever, as a matter of fact he paid no attention to this funny woman making all of these funny noises, and why should he, she always went inside anyway. I am sure the mild scolding she did give him

when I would return him to her, was in his mind, just some more funny noises that this funny woman makes.

So down to business, we had to teach him the meaning of the word COME. So for Angela's first week, I instructed her to pick one word to be used when she wants Thunder to come. She chose COME. I made sure she understood that anytime she practiced or called Thunder in real life situations that it was important to keep the command consistent, "THUNDER COME!" Not his name. Not Thunder come here. Not kissy noises, not whistling, not Thunder here, but "THUNDER COME!" Now if Thunder had a negative association with the word COME, then I would have told her to pick a whole new word, but he did not have any association with the word what so ever. Using a word that has a negative conditioned emotional response, is like expecting a human to respond happily to someone who is cussing at them, not likely to happen.

Her first 'come when called game' was simply getting him to happily come, inside the house and in the back yard, consistently. She was to always have a high value treat whenever he came as a reward, and she was to do it frequently throughout the day whether he was 2 feet away or down the hall around the corner. She also had to keep a 6' leash on him, so that if he chose not to come, she could step on the leash, wave the treat in front of his nose, and back up with him following her while saying, "THUNDER COME" I instructed her to never stand there and call him over and over and over. If he does not come on the first recall, then she must go to him with a treat, and lure him back towards her saying "THUNDER COME". She took direction well, and had no problems that week. The lesson to be learned this week for Thunder was that COME = his favorite treat, and that she will not let him get away with not responding to the word, so he might as well COME when called.

At our second session, she proudly displayed how wonderful Thunder did at his recall. Great start, so now I wanted her to make it a bit more challenging for him. Our second COME game was Hide & Seek. She protested a bit, saying how silly it was for a 60 year old woman and her old dog to play hide and seek, but I did not give in, she had promised to follow my instruction, no matter what. I instructed her to pay attention to Thunder, and when he was in his own little world, duck behind a wall, and say "Thunder COME!", then when he found her to celebrate like she had just got him back from the pound, with lots of love, praise and treats! Because she was hiding, I told her it was ok to repeat the command, but to give herself 10 seconds before she did so. Sure enough, she hid, and the foundation we had laid the week before paid off, Thunder perked his ears and moved in the direction of her voice. He stopped to listen; 10 seconds had gone by so she called again. He took off in her direction and found her behind the wall of the living room. She celebrated and jackpotted him, he danced around, and for a split second I saw youth in both of them. This was going very well!

At our third session, I brought out the long 20' line and we simply sat on her front porch with Thunder attached to the end. We were going to do the COME game, but only allow him to go twenty feet out. As Thunder started to explore, you could see him start to tune out the rest of the world. I instructed her to do a recall, and if he did not come then she would gently reel him in, and when he finally got to her she would praise, love, & treat him, then release him to go back out and smell. She followed my instruction with a "THUNDER COME", and Thunder did not move, she reeled him in, praised, loved, and

gave him a treat and then let him go again. He looked back as if to say “*REALLY?*” Yes Thunder you are free to go back to doing what you were doing. What we were working on here, is helping him understand, that just because he hears the words “THUNDER COME”, it does not mean that his exploring has to come to an end. It took us about 5 reel in’s before he started to break free from the smells on his own. This was great to him, he gets the freedom to sniff, he hears “THUNDER COME”, he goes and gets the treat, and goes right back to what he was doing. This is an important realization for many dogs, because COME often means that playtime, exploring, running, and/or enjoying themselves ends; not a good association with the word come. Will there be times when you call him and play time ends? Absolutely, but more often than not you simply want to get your dog in the habit of willingly checking in with you so if you do have to go, you can easily grab his collar.

As we entered our 4th session, I wanted to bring in a major distraction. I wanted to teach Thunder to come when engaged with another dog. I brought my dog Joker, a Boston Terrier who LOVES other dogs. Now Thunder was not so interested in playing, being the mature guy he is, but he was very interested in marking his territory, especially if Joker made a mark himself. We put the 20’ line on Thunder, and set him free in the back yard with Joker. We did have to real him in the first 3 times, but then Thunder realized that he may as well grab a treat while he was out doing his thing. However, this time I instructed Angela to gently grab his collar before giving him a treat, and then release him. I can’t tell you how many times I have been at a dog park and have heard someone say, “Can you grab my dog please?” Well what that dog has figured out is when mom or dad reaches for his collar; it is time to leave the park. Calling your dog from interacting with another dog, but gently grabbing his collar before you treat him, helps to desensitize him to the collar grab. This worked just fine for Thunder, as I am sure Angela rarely grabbed for his collar in the past, but just the same, I wanted to make sure she could grab him without him dodging the collar regardless.

For dogs that are REALLY sensitive to the collar grab, you want to treat your pup by holding the treat right next to your body. Your hand will actually be touching your own body as the dog takes the treat. Once the pup is comfortable enough to take the treat that close to your body, you will want to continue to hold the treat in the hand that is touching your body, but pet him under his chin with your other hand, before you release the treat. Once the pup is ok with that process then you can start to gently touch the collar, before you release the treat.

The next week we went for a walk. I now wanted her to work on come when called in a totally different environment than her home. As we walked, Thunder was busy running from smell to smell. What I wanted her to teach him today is to come, even if his nose is telling him to stay. I instructed her to do a recall when Thunder was totally engrossed in a smell. As Thunder came across a very interesting smell, she said “THUNDER COME!” and to my surprise, he did and continued to come each and every time we asked him to. What she told me was that she did this on her walks with him frequently. I was so excited that this woman actually took my advice and looked for training opportunities. She was now thinking on her own! I love it when this happens.

At our last and final week, we sat on Angela's front porch with Thunder on the 20' line. I looked at her and said, "Ok, now let him off the leash." She looked at me knowing this was her final test. She had worked her little dogs recall inside the house hundreds of times, in the back yard hundreds of times, on the leash hundreds of times, and even took the initiative to work on his recall at her sister's house with her dogs around a good 20 times. Had she taught him the command? Did "THUNDER COME!" have meaning? You bet! She let him off the leash and he took off to sniff. The moment he got a bit far or on the edge of her yard, she would say "THUNDER COME!" and he came each time. She was so proud of him, and I was so proud of her.

I made sure to let her know that it was not ok to leave him unattended outside, especially to do his business on other people's lawns, but through consistency, baby steps, practicing in many different contexts, and making the recall very rewarding and enjoyable, if he did get outside, she now has a dog that will come when called. We gave "THUNDER COME!" meaning to Thunder. We also removed any reservation he might have had to coming by keeping it all very positive and allowing him the freedom to go back to what he was doing. However, the best part about this whole process was that she taught her old dog a new trick, which in the end brought them closer to each other.