

5 Lifesaving Commands for Your Dog

By Dr. Laura Hady

Veterinary behaviorist Ian Dunbar taught me many years ago that animal names should be two syllables with a vowel at the end. The reason is that your voice tends to rise at the end of words or statements, so it sounds more pleasing to your pet. In contrast, commands are typically one syllable to grab your dog's attention quickly. Rewards for appropriate responses can be verbal like, "Good job!" A dog treat or a favorite toy can also be given. While many dogs know how to "sit" for a treat, there are four other potentially lifesaving commands that I recommend owners train their dog to obey. You can teach the following at home or in a class with a certified dog trainer.

1) "Sit" is a good distraction command and is the stepping stone to other basic commands. It is a good idea to start working on this when the dog is a puppy. If you raise your hand with a treat in your palm above a dog's head before you say its name and give the "sit" command, the pet is more likely to obey. Some dogs need just a little

pressure on their lower back to encourage them to sit down. Wait a few seconds before giving the treat. As dogs age, it may be more painful for them to sit due to compression in their lower back. If this is the case, allow them to stand for a treat.

2) "Come" can save your dog from an oncoming car or an attacking animal. One way to train your dog to come is to have it sit by another person who can control the collar or harness. Attach a long leash (preferably 12 feet or longer) to the collar. Walk 10 feet away without putting tension on the leash. Turn around and raise your hand with the leash. As you start to put your hand down, say your dog's name and command the dog to "come." Be sure to reward your dog when it comes to you. The hand signal for when your dog is off leash is to raise your hand, bend the elbow, and place your palm toward your chest.

3) "Stay" can keep your dog away from a dangerous area. The stay command is best taught in a safe and quiet location. Place the pet in a sit position and give the dog the "stay" command. Then, raise your palm in front of your dog's nose without

touching it. Give your dog a treat if it stays in that position for at least two seconds. Continue to lengthen the time between the sit command and the treat. After the animal works up to a 15-second stay, you can give a release command such as, "OK" or "Go." You can also simply raise your hands up in the air to signal release to the dog. Once you give the release command, then you can toss your pup a treat. The dog may get up to retrieve the treat. Keep in mind that you may need to spend 15 minutes a day for two to three weeks to reliably train this command.

4) "Heel" is a command for a dog to stay in a controlled stride near you when walking, without wandering or pulling on the leash. Start training by having your dog sit by your left side. Say your dog's name and then the command to "heel" while taking a few steps forward. Lure your dog a few feet, then give your dog a treat. For every few steps that your dog walks in stride and close to you, give a treat. Over time, take more steps before giving a treat and keep goodies in your pocket instead of in your hand. I do not keep my dog at a heel for our entire walk. My dogs normally walk with a loose leash, and the heel command with a slight tug on the leash helps to get them closer to me if I sense an abnormality in the environment.

5) "Leave it" keeps your dog



away from other dogs or from something you do not want them to eat like a rabbit carcass or fecal matter. To train for this, place a tasty treat on a flat surface and put your hand over it. Let your dog sniff your hand, then say your dog's name followed by, "Leave it." Wait until your dog finishes sniffing your hand, then say, "Yes," and give the dog the high-value treat. Once your dog stops sniffing your hand when you say, "Leave it", leash your dog and toss a lower valued treat such as a dog kibble just outside of their reach. When your dog stops sniffing and pulling you toward the treat, say "Yes," and then give your dog a high-value treat from your hand.

Please remember that practice makes perfect. So, don't stop trying the exercises after just one day or even a few weeks. Training your dog with these commands helps to build their confidence and reinforces the human-animal bond.

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