Train Your Dog to Perform These Critical Commands:

It Just Might Save Her Life!

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Training our dogs is about more than teaching fun tricks or fine-tuning polite manners. It's also about implementing behaviors that protect and safeguard our dogs in their day-to-day lives. In particular, 3 lifesaving commands are critical for every dog to understand and reliably respond to:

down stay, drop it, and come.

In the guide on the next page, learn more about the importance of each of these commands, as well as training tips for improving your dog's speedy response.

1. Down Stay

In the face of the unexpected, we may not always be able to physically remove our dog immediately away from a dangerous situation. In such cases, having our dog remain stationary until we can address the situation properly is essential.

Many working dogs, including those who work with the National Disaster Search Dog Foundation, are trained to immediately drop into a down position and stay in place until they're released. Doing so helps keep the dog safe as she navigates risky situations and hazardous terrain. "Down stay" training is also important for pet dogs, because some questionable situations are made safer if our dog can temporarily remain in place until the situation is resolved or until help arrives.

Such situations include a hazard that's between us and our dog, such as being separated on the other side of the street from our dog with an oncoming car approaching, as could happen with a dog who slips out of her collar and is running loose. Keeping our dog in a settled "down" can also help us to better navigate potentially tense interactions, such as encountering an overly exuberant neighborhood child during a walk.

Ideally, teach the dog to respond to this behavior on both a visual and audible cue, such as a large, obvious hand signal and a specific word cue or whistle. This can help increase your dog's understanding and ability to react to your cues if either her sight or hearing is compromised in the moment, as may occur for a dog at a distance or if turned and looking away from the parent. It's also imperative that the behavior is practiced with many variables, including the dog being able to perform the behavior when she's far away, with distractions, and when both pet and parent are stationary or in motion.

2. Drop It

Dogs largely explore and experience the world with their mouths, and many are known for having an undiscriminating appetite. Such insatiable curiosity and keen appetitive interest often get dogs into troublesome dilemmas where they're at risk for ingesting off-limits, dangerous items. To help combat potential ingestion of choking and intestinal tract hazards, as well as toxic substances and poisonous foods, "drop it" is a must-teach behavior that offers a way for parents to get their dogs to release questionable items from their mouths when asked. Teaching a dog to willingly and immediately let go of an item held in her mouth is especially important, as forcibly taking an item from a dog can increase the dog's urgency to swallow the item before it's taken—and can be cause for confrontation and a potential bite if the dog resource-guards the item.

"Drop it" provides a safeguard for your dog in the event that efforts to dog-proof your canine's surroundings fall short.

You'll ideally want to practice "drop it" with a variety of items, including release of toys, food, and household objects that are safe for your dog to practice with. Pair the release of items with ample, high-value rewards that are greater in value (to your dog) than the item the dog had to begin with. And, when safe to do so during practice runs, return the item the dog originally had; doing so can decrease the dog's potential reluctance to let go of a desired item.

3. Come

Instilling a reliable recall provides added protection by giving you the power to pull your dog away from potential threats and back to safety at your side. A reliable "come" when called can help avert a problematic situation, such as redirecting a dog's keen interest away from a discarded chicken bone the dog sniffs out during an off-leash outing to gaining the dog's safe return if she slips out the front door when company arrives.

When it comes to teaching the behavior, keep in mind that many dogs don't reliably come because doing so often results in unfavorable consequences from the dog's perspective, including the end of playtime or off-leash freedom. Improve the recall by keeping it exciting and full of favorable outcomes, including a jackpot of fabulous treat rewards and the frequent opportunity for immediate release and permission to go play again after your pup receives her reward.

Teaching your dog to consistently and speedily respond to these critical commands is imperative and well worth the training investment. Once you and your dog master these, you'll have 3 solid behaviors to call on in an emergency to better keep your dog safe.

Mikkel Becker is a certified trainer and certified behavior consultant who specializes in training dogs and cats. She is the coauthor of 6 books and the lead animal trainer for FearFreePets.com. Mikkel is committed to helping pets and their people live better lives together through kind training and bond-building methods that partner closely with the pet's veterinary team.

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