

Hot pursuit

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Racing after a squirrel, a bunny or next door's cat is high on most dogs' list of favourite pastimes. So how can you compete for your dog's attention when he's enjoying the thrill of the chase?

Chasing is such a basic, self-rewarding behaviour that it's a wonder not all dogs do it at every chance they get! Dogs love running, they adore following scent, and they get high on the adrenalin rush of a high speed pursuit. Thankfully, most of our dogs learn to chase appropriate items, at least most of the time. Toys, games and retrieves all help to channel this natural behaviour and help to give our dogs outlets for their need to express this most basic of drives. However, if you live in an area heavily populated by other, more enticing prey – whether these be animal, human or machine - it may be that you have to take steps to control chasing in a way that others never have to.

So, what is your dog chasing?

The very first thing to consider when tackling a chase problem is what your dog is actually chasing. This may seem obvious, but some dogs who have an obsession for chasing rabbits may ignore joggers and cyclists – or vice versa. Equally, a dog with a cat-chasing fantasy may spend all his time in the local park tracking the scent of local felines, but may put on a bit of a spurt to chase a squirrel in their absence.

Some dogs also develop chase obsessions with far more dangerous quarry. Cars, bikes, horses, sheep and other animals are all in a category of such high risk that, frankly, management is often the only option. At the other end of the scale are dogs that like to have a quick sprint towards the blackbird on the middle of the lawn – hardly a case for worry. What your dog wants to chase, when and how, will all determine just how much work, or how careful you have to be with his training and exercise.

If your dog is a chaser, ask yourself whether he is a visual chaser, or a scent follower. Many dogs seem able to resist one stimulus, but not the other. This may depend on breed or type – quite clearly sight hounds will become completely 'fixed' when they catch movement in their peripheral vision, while hounds or terrier types become completely deaf when hunting by scent – it seems to completely overtake their senses and can make them practically incapable of concentrating on any other intervention.

Exercising your dog off-lead in an area where wildlife is prevalent can become a nightmare if your dog has a lust for hunting or chasing. Some areas, particularly those which are post-foot and mouth, or those where walkers are few and far between can be doubly problematic if the wildlife frequently presents itself in front of your dog looking rather casual and with a distinct air of nonchalance. In my area, we are lucky enough to catch glimpses of red deer and muntjacks almost every day, and whilst this is wonderful for people, it means that we have had to put in a lot of training to ensure that the dogs see the deer as a cue to return to us, rather than to chase them.

There are probably as many ways to train your dog to avoid chasing as there are reasons why they chase. Which one you choose to work on – or which combination – will depend on your time, patience, level of skill and your dog's reactions to training. However, simplicity is often best – and don't forget that this includes just putting your dog on lead!

Teach your dog to come back when he's called – as an instant reaction

Teaching your dog a really reliable recall is pretty essential for all off-lead exercise. However, training the recall with distractions needs to be built up over time and distance. Using a whistle for recall training can help here, as can using high level rewards for difficult situations. Building up distractions can be a challenge on your own – and this is where a good trainer can make all the difference in increasing responses and in creating consequences for the dog if he doesn't return when you call. These consequences need not be punishing – but they do need to be effective, such as being put on the lead and marched away from the owner or being held on lead while the owner disappears.

Teach your dog to sit at a distance

Do you remember your times tables? Well, if like me you remember some of them but not others, you will understand how some multiples come to mind instantaneously, while others need a bit more calculation. The 'instant' responses may not be because they are easy to work out, but rather that you recall them without thought – they come to you purely from habit. Teaching your dog to sit at a distance needs to be this instantaneous. The training needs to be so exact that he doesn't even think when he hears the word sit – indeed his bottom is already on the floor by the time he's truly registered what you've said. For many dogs, training an instant sit is often easier than an immediate recall (which, after all, involves stopping, turning and then coming back, rather than a single action,) which makes it great for use in an emergency. For most dogs, teaching a sit at a distance needs some initial work. They may already know the word sit, but they are used to performing the action close-up. Practising with the dog behind a baby gate with you at a distance can be a good way of getting this started. This can then be progressed to tethering the dog at a short distance outside – as soon as he sits, you can click and go back to him with a food treat or favourite toy.

Teach your dog to look at you when cued by the animal arriving

Essentially, this method relies on the dog making a decision about what's rewarding and what's not. It takes patience and good timing. With the dog on lead, the handler simply stands still and waits for eye contact and attention to be refocused on them. Clearly, this may take some time with dogs that have a high prey drive. However, as soon as the dog turns and gives their handler eye contact, the handler clicks and then all good things occur – treats, dinner, play – you name it! Over time, it's possible to condition the dog to looking at you when the object of his chase affection appears – in other words, the very appearance of a small furry animal will cause him to turn and look to you.

Teach your dog a chase recall

Often used in conjunction with recall training and cue training, teaching your dog that the appearance of a prey animal cues a chase game with a favourite toy can be one of the most effective ways of re-directing chasing. In fact, this method has been so effective with one of my dogs that on trying to film her progress in the middle of a field of wild rabbits, she wouldn't even look at them! This method relies heavily on forming a 'healthy addiction' to a favourite toy – a ball on a rope, or Frisbee, for example. This gets produced on walks and is used as a direct reward for turning attention away from even the thought of chasing inappropriate things. This method may take time and persistence, but can work like a dream.