

# Retrieve to Hand: A step by step approach

By Tawna Skinner

## Part A:

Gather your tools: puppy dummy or other small object, clicker and training treats. If you want to sit down and do this, a chair is helpful. I prefer using kibble in the beginning and change to higher value treats later on when I need a larger motivation reward. Having the pup somewhat hungry helps too.

Got to a quiet place inside where there are no distractions and your pup cannot leave.

1. Hold the dummy in one hand on the end. Show the dummy to the pup and then step away one step and hold the dummy in front of you at about the dog's eye level, 4-6 inches from the dog's nose. The dog should not have to move to touch the dummy at first. When the dog touches the dummy with its nose, click and treat. Repeat a few times (6-10 times). As soon as you know that the dog knows how to get the treat, touching the dummy with his nose, do it a couple of more times and then quit. If the dog is not interested in the dummy at all, spread a bit of peanut butter on it.
2. Next session. Repeat the above a couple of times, or as necessary, so that you know he knows how to get the treat. Now your goal is for him to open his mouth and put his tongue or teeth on the dummy. So now you are going to wait until he tries that. Whatever way he does that, click and treat. He may even try to take it out of your hand. That is ok. He is just proceeding quicker. If he does take the dummy, just drop the treat off to the side. He will drop the dummy to get the treat and you can pick it up. Do it a few more times, then end. If he is not putting his teeth on it then lower the criteria to a lick, lips touching it or a tooth and proceed from there.
3. Do two or three more sessions like that until he is taking the dummy out of your hand to get the treat. He will drop it to get the treat. That is ok. We are not interested in him holding it a long time at this point.
4. After he is regularly taking the dummy out of your hand it is time to start moving the dummy toward the floor. Drop your hand with the dummy down a couple of inches and proceed as above. With some pups you can take it down to the floor quickly and with others you can only go a couple of inches at a time. You can experiment to see what it will take with your dog. Only go as fast as the dog understands. If you have two failures in a row go back to what he knows and proceed a bit more slowly. 4 successes in a row is a good time to quit that particular session. We want every session to end in success.
5. When the dummy is on the floor with your hand on it and he is picking it up you can start removing your hand. Once again, the progression may be slow (taking one finger off at a time) or fast (taking your entire hand way at once) and the dog understands that he has to pick it up to get the treat.

6. After the pup can easily pick up the dummy from the floor, without your hand on it, is the time to start having the dog move forward to take the dummy. First hold the dummy in your hand far enough from the dog that he/she will have to take a step to get it. Click and treat. Do this several times so you know that the dog knows to move forward to take the dummy and to get a treat. End session. Do a few more sessions, extending the distance you hold the dummy from the dog. When the dog is reliably walking forward to take the dummy from your hand it is time to add the cue.
7. The 'cue' is the word or words you will use to identify the action you want the dog to do. I use the word "Fetch". It means the entire progression from moving to the object, picking it up (the "take") and returning it to the handler. There is no separate cue for holding the object as anytime the dog has the dummy in its mouth it is holding. Reinforcing the "the take" reinforces the hold.
8. Go back to the beginning and go through all the steps previously mentioned and adding the cue. When speaking the word, say it as a **statement** with calm energy. Refrain from saying it like a command or question.

Note: Sessions 1-8 should be done with you sitting, kneeling or standing near the dog. You can also put a short leash on the dog but do not pull on it. Refrain from verbalizing except for an occasional "good dog". Smile and keep your energy calm and happy. Do not interrupt the session by talking with others or answering your phone. Wait until you are finished or do your business before you start. When you become distracted, your dog will become confused. Always end a session with the dog wanting more.

## **Part B:**

1. When the pup understands that the cue "Fetch" means to take the dummy and he is consistently doing that we will extend the distance, small increments at a time. This will also be the time to shape the return and carry. For the next step you will need to be standing. If you have not done any of the above from a standing position you will need to go through the above lessons while standing. Standing above the dog is a new picture, a new distraction for the dog and because of that may need some practice with you in a new position.
2. Place the dummy 2-3 feet in front of the dog on the floor. Give the cue and as the dog moves toward the dummy, you step back one step. When the dog picks it up and begins to turn his/her head toward you "click". Be ready with a treat as the dog may drop the dummy at the sound of the click. (If the dog goes out and does not pick up the dummy you need to go back to step 5 until your dog can reliably pick up the dummy from the floor without your hand on it.) The progression here is to reward for a head turn, a full turn, a full turn and return to you. Do this in short sessions. Extending the distance can be accomplished both by you placing the dummy further away from the dog's start

point and by you moving backwards away from the dog so he has to turn and carry the dummy to you. Remember that the dog will most likely drop the dummy when you click. This is fine because all we are focusing on at this time is the pickup, carry and return. Slowly and patiently extend the distance up to about a 20 ft. toss.

Notes: It is ok and good to randomly click and reward any part of the retrieve progression. It demonstrates to the dog that each part is important and will help to imbed that part into the dog's mind. So, if the dog races out to the dummy and you click to signal that he was doing a good send, but he doesn't pick up the dummy, no matter. Treat anyway and then do it again and treat the pickup this time. Then click and treat for the entire progression. All are good.

As we go forward in this 'retrieve to hand' progression your dog will need to know how to sit in front of you. If you have not taught your dog to sit, and/or sit in front of you, now is the time to do it.

## Part C:

In this section we are going to strengthen the recall ('come') and add a 'sit' at the end. We will do this without a dummy and then progress to adding a dummy to the return and a sit in front.

Do the following steps in the house.

1. Call the dog to you using your recall cue/command ("come" or "here"). When the dog arrives click and treat. Immediately ask the dog to sit in front of you. When it does, click and treat. Walk off from the dog a little way and repeat. Do this 5-6 x and then end. In the next session, call the dog to you and wait to see if the dog will give you a sit on its own. If so, click and treat. If it doesn't, give the 'sit' cue and when the dog responds click and treat. It is alright to give the 'sit' cue, just wait until the dog responds to click and treat.

Once the dog is understanding that a 'sit' is required when coming back to you (with a cue or not) to get the treat, you will now require that behavior every time you give a recall command, no matter if it is part of a retrieve or not, and no matter where you are or what you are doing. This is important, because we want the dog to develop an automatic response to sit when recalled.

2. Do several sessions, changing places in the house, and then move to the yard after the dog is doing it well (80 % of the time) indoors.
3. Outside, put a check cord on the dog. Proceed as you did in the house, starting with short distances and then enlarging the distances to the maximum distance of your enclosed yard. This exercise is pretty boring to dogs so only do it 3-5x/session and make sure they get a good treat and praise. Having them a bit hungry helps. Also, a play session or run afterwards makes it more fun for the dog.

Because the dog may become distracted when outside, you may have to use the check cord to get compliance. To do this, grab the check cord and give a couple of quick, light tugs on the collar as you give the recall command and then just stand there. Do not pull the dog to you. If the dog responds and comes to you, click and treat. If not, give a couple of more light tugs, but no command. Click and treat when the pup responds. If you are having to use the check cord for getting compliance on the 'come', it is not time yet to add the "sit" to it. If this is the case, practice your recall in several sessions, with high value treats, until the dog willingly will come to you without check cord inducement. Then go back to adding the 'sit' cue at the end of the recall as described above.

Remember the "come" is the most important command for you and your dog. There must be absolute obedience. So, it is up to you to make sure that the dog wants and is willing to come to you. Never ever reprimand, hit or yell at your dog when it comes to you. That will destroy the trust your dog has in you. Always praise for coming. If there is a situation where you ask the dog to come and he/she doesn't, go get the dog, leash the dog up and go back to the car, or house. Make it a point to run your dog with a check cord so that you can catch your dog if the recall command is not strong yet or working.

Adding the dummy. Go back inside to do the following sessions.

4. As in Part B, place a dummy a short distance in front of your dog. Send your dog for the retrieve. When your dog returns to you, ask the dog to 'sit'. The pup may spit out the dummy at first and then sit. That is ok. You can just pick up the dummy and gently put it back into the dog's mouth while it is in the sit position. You may have to hold the dummy in place with your hand under the chin. As soon as the dog is sitting and holding the dummy, click and treat. Or you can say "fetch" again and when the dog picks it up, ask for a 'sit' again. It may take a few times for the dog to understand that it has to do two things at once (hold the dummy and sit). This can be mentally taxing to the dog, so remember to be patient, quiet and kind. Remember cues should be said as statements with a calm voice....no forceful command like FETCH!!!GDI!
5. When the dog understands that it must sit in front of you on the return with the dummy you can change the criteria by doing your retrieve sessions in different rooms in the house. Make sure the dog knows this 'sit' part (80% compliance) before moving on.
6. Then you can change the criteria again and begin asking the dog to hold the dummy for a longer time period before clicking and treating. After the dog returns with the dummy and sits in front of you, wait 1-2 seconds before you click and treat. (Do not use the word 'hold' as it is extraneous. The word 'fetch' means the entire process from going to get the dummy, to returning, sitting and holding it until you say the release command.) Work up to 15 seconds. As the dog understands this new criterion you can add the release cue ('out', 'give' or 'drop') when you click, then treat. Also, as the dog understands these new criteria of holding while sitting, start varying the holding period,

before giving the release command: 1 sec, then 5, then 6, then 3, etc. That teaches the dog to pay attention to you and not assume that he knows when to drop the dummy. Be aware of what you are doing with your body. If you lean over every time, he comes to you he will think that is the release and will begin to anticipate the drop. Do not reach for the dummy until you give the release command.

7. Now you can go outside and work through all the previous steps of parts B and C in the yard.

## Part D:

By the end of Part C your dog should now be an enthusiastic and willing retriever of a dummy in the house and yard. The dog, by now, should understand the retrieving progression: going away from the handler on cue to the dummy, picking it up, returning to the handler, sitting in front of the handler and releasing the dummy, on cue, to the handler. If your dog can do all of that 80% of the time, in the house and yard, you are now ready for the next steps.

In Part D, we will be expanding the criteria for the retrieve by adding new objects to retrieve, adding distance, new places and various distractions.

At this point it is important to review and remind yourself about the rules for raising criteria and about how your dog learns and views the world. Here is a list of recommendations.

1. Add only one criterion at a time and in only one measurable increment at a time, such as distance, duration, distraction, object, etc.
2. When adding a new criterion (new object, for example) the dog may temporarily forget a particular behavior, therefore standards for executing what the dog already knows must be relaxed.
3. It is the trainer's role to keep criteria at attainable levels and increase them only in increments that enable the dog to succeed.
4. Anytime a behavior deteriorates while attempting to raise a criterion, lower it again and reinforce the behavior several times at the previous level before attempting to raise the criterion again.
5. Keep in mind that the dog will not stay in the training game unless it is winning on a regular basis, i.e. regular treating of valuable treats. Always use the least valuable treat that the dog will work for. That way the dog does not get picky.
6. Be prepared to reward sudden bursts of understanding, improvements or high levels of performance.
7. Remain quiet as verbal cueing or 'cheering the dog on' can present enough distraction to bring work to an abrupt halt.
8. Remain calm. Anger or frustration in the trainer will cause the dog to quit working/learning.
9. Know your dog's limitations. Watch for signs of stress (tucked tail, rolling over, refusals, cowering, leaving the area). Probably time to take a break.

10. Be aware of distractions. End the session or move to a quieter place if distractions are influencing the dog's willingness to work.
11. Always end a training session on a good note, even if you have to lower the criteria for a particular behavior.
12. Avoid corrections, verbal or physical, when the dog is learning new behaviors.
13. Remember that retrieving is a "job" for the dog. While in training do not throw things for fun. You will be giving your dog mixed messages. After the dog is fully trained in retrieving you can use this activity for exercise and mental stimulation, but not before.
14. Dogs do not generalize like humans. Every new criterion added is a brand-new scenario to the dog. Just because the pup can retrieve a dummy to hand does not mean he can retrieve a dead bird to hand. Nor does good retrieving in the yard equate to the same behavior in a new place.
15. Dogs learn by association. If there is anything that the dog associates as negative with the retrieve training, success will become much more difficult to achieve.

In this section, you will be expanding your dog's repertoire of items he will 'fetch'. After the dummy and/or toys you can add a small (frozen) Hungarian or chukar partridge, teal or pigeon. If the pup has never seen or smelled one of these you will want to introduce it to the pup first. To do this, just set the frozen bird down and let the pup explore it. The pup may paw at it, bark at it, run away from it, mouth it, roll on it. Now matter what the pup does, do not interfere or say anything. Just observe. Eventually, the pup will try to pick it up and carry it. This is what you want. Let him carry it around and get used to it. He may try to chew on it. That is the time to trade him a yummy treat for the bird and quit.

Now that you know the pup can pick up the bird you can now incorporate it in to your retrieving sessions. Once again, begin in the house. As soon as the pup can do all he did before with a dummy in the house, but with the bird, you can then go to the yard and go through all the steps again. This should all go very quickly now that the pup knows what you want.

When the pup is doing what you want 80% of the time in the yard, you can start going to new areas to practice retrieving. You will have to start again in this new place, because as I said before, dogs do not generalize well. A new place has all sorts of new and interesting distractions. Best to go for an exploratory walk around the area before doing any training. After the walk, start with a dummy and go through the sequence again over several days/ training sessions. You should know the sequence by heart now. When your dog can retrieve a dummy in this new place just like he does at home in the yard, you can add the cold dead bird or go to another new area. Over time you will want the dog to be able to retrieve dummies, Dokken birds and dead, cold birds from at least 7 different areas. After that he will be able to generalize to most other places you go.

When your dog can retrieve all those things from short distances in several different areas then you can start increasing distances, adding shots, having other people throw the object to be

retrieved etc. You can toss dummies into shallow water, across narrow streams, into brush or the front edges of cattails. Make sure the dog can see where the items fall. No blind retrieves quite yet. Be creative, make it fun and REWARDING and just difficult enough that the pup has to work a bit but is successful.