

# What's in a Name?

By Sherry Woodard

Teaching name recognition is a great way to start a personal relationship with a dog. When I work with a dog, I teach her to respond enthusiastically to me by calling her by name in a happy tone of voice. A dog's name should be a good thing for her to hear. Even shelter dogs should be given names and be taught to respond to them.

What is the hidden value in a dog loving her name?

- Your dog will run – not walk – to you when she hears her name.
- You can use her name to interrupt and distract her from any behavior (e.g., barking, chewing inappropriate items) that you want to stop. Remember to keep your tone happy – you don't want the dog to associate her name with a reprimand.
- You can use her name and the positive associations she has with it to help her become more comfortable in scary situations. For example, you can say her name and consequently have her focus on you when walking by something that makes her fearful or anxious. If she is relaxed and distracted until you pass the scary situation, she will realize that it wasn't as frightening as in the past.
- If your dog knows her name and has good recall, you can call her away from a potentially dangerous situation.



To teach name recognition, pack a treat pouch with about a hundred pea-sized soft treats. Take the dog somewhere with few distractions. I tether the dog to me, a doorknob or a chair leg so she won't wander off. Have a treat in your hand ready and when she looks away from you, say her name and give her the treat. Interact with her briefly, then wait for her to look away again and repeat. Do this over and over; to keep it fun, always use a happy tone.

Once you have practiced in locations with few distractions, start practicing in locations with more distractions. Then, add other people to the game of learning. Start with the exercise described above: Have a friend stand near the dog and instruct him/her to wait until the dog is not looking and then have your friend call the dog's name and give her a treat. Next, stand a short distance from your friend and alternate calling the dog's name and giving treats. You and your friend can start moving farther away from each other and have the dog on a long leash so she can run between you for fun and treats. This can grow into a long-distance game of recall. It's a great way for your dog to interact, exercise and learn to enjoy more people.

What should you name your dog? Most people try a variety of names before settling on one; some dogs have first, middle and last names. I knew a dog with a long Russian

name. Most long names chosen are eventually shortened or replaced by nicknames. I think the important part of choosing a name is that the dog learns that it is his name.

Some people worry about changing a dog's name after adoption: Will the dog be confused? Will it be difficult to teach him a new name? I haven't found it to be a problem. Dogs generally respond just fine to name changes or nicknames if the names are properly taught and maintained as positive associations. Every socialized dog will want to come when called, looking forward to spending time with humans because humans can be best friends to dogs.

*Sherry Woodard is the animal behavior and training consultant at Best Friends. She develops resources and provides consulting services nationally to help achieve Best Friends' No More Homeless Pets mission.*