

Teaching “Leave It”

Many dogs have something that gets their attention—other dogs, cats, skateboards, food on the ground, etc. “Leave it” is a behavior you can teach your dog that can help you manage your dog’s response in these situations.

Note: This handout assumes that you are using a reward marker (“yes” or clicker) and that you have a basic understanding of reward marker training.

What exactly is the “Leave It?”

“Leave it” is a combination behavior. It involves having the dog break eye contact and turn his head away from the stimuli (the thing that he is interested in), make eye contact with you, and hold that eye contact until he is released.

Important tip: Move through each of the steps below as fast as you can. If you hang out at one step too long, your dog will get “stuck” in that behavior and it will be more difficult to move to the next step. Think of this the way you would a shaping exercise—up your criteria as quickly as you can without frustrating your dog. If you practice regularly, you will move through all of the steps in a few short weeks!

Steps to training “leave it”

1. **Doggy Zen:** The first step is to teach your dog to leave something alone that he/she wants. To do this, practice the exercise of doggy zen with a treat.
 - Have a handful of super good treats and one rather boring treat available.
 - Put the boring treat in your left hand (have the super good treats in a pouch, behind your back, on a table or in some other way close at hand but not available to your dog).
 - Present the boring treat to your dog in a closed fist (so he/she can smell it, but can’t get to it). Let him/her lick, sniff and try to get to the treat.
 - The moment your dog backs away a tiny bit, click or “yes” and give your dog one of the super good treats from your other hand. Be very patient—the first try or two can take several minutes before a dog gives up and backs away.
 - Repeat several times until your dog is immediately backing off of the treat.
 - Move the boring treat to your right hand and repeat the exercise.
2. **Look away and make eye contact:** The second step to the “leave it” behavior is teaching your dog to make eye contact with you when he backs off of the treat.
 - Follow the first three bullets above. When you get to the fourth bullet, instead of clicking the moment your dog backs away, wait for him to look into your eyes, then click or “yes” and give your dog one of the great

treats. Once again, be patient. At first, your dog will not know that you have raised the criteria. He or she may go back to the hand, sniff and lick some more, etc. Wait. The second he/she looks at you to figure out what you want, click and treat.

- Practice this several times with the boring treat in each hand.
3. **Put it on cue:** Once your dog has the idea of looking away from your fist and into your eyes, put the behavior on cue. I like the word “leave it.”
 - Immediately before you present the fist with the boring treat, say “leave it”. After he associates the word with the action, you can present the fist first, then say, “leave it.”
 4. **Look away, make eye contact and hold eye contact:** Once your dog is easily looking away from the boring treat and making eye contact with you, start increasing the time he/she needs to hold the eye contact before you click or “yes”. At first, you will click for just the eye contact, then for holding it for a half a second, then a whole second, then two seconds, etc. Your goal at this point is to increase to 5-10 seconds of eye contact.
 5. **Make it harder:** It’s time to up your criteria in two ways—make the object he is looking away from more difficult and increase the length of time your dog holds eye contact.
 - Make it more difficult by having your dog look away from better treats, by having him/her look away from treats in an open palm, by having him look away from a treat on the floor, etc.
 - Increase the length of time your dog needs to look away, up to about 30 seconds.
 - Practice each of these criteria separately. In other words, if you are working on the length of time, use a boring treat in a closed fist. If you are working on a more difficult object (i.e. a better treat in an open palm), click at first for simply looking away, then for making eye contact, then for holding the eye contact.
 - Then put them together and practice harder objects for longer periods of time.
 - At this point, start varying the rewards, giving less interesting treats for easier responses (your dog is the judge of this, not you!) and better treats for more difficult responses.
 6. **Practice with lots of items, in lots of locations, lots of positions:** Once your dog can look away from a great treat in an open palm (or on the floor) and hold your eye contact for about a minute, start generalizing this behavior to other things.
 - Use food, toys, odd things that he would normally investigate.
 - Practice with varied distractions.
 - Practice in different locations and with movement involved.
 - Practice with your dog in different positions—in front of you, next to you on either side, standing, sitting, walking, at a distance, etc.

7. **Begin applying “leave it” to *very high value things in a natural environment*:** Once your dog can “leave it” with many different things, in many locations, and while in different positions, start practicing around real world objects and things.
 - Practice with higher value objects at a distance first (if possible).
 - Use the absolute best rewards possible.
 - Gradually move him/her closer and closer until he can do the behavior within a few feet.
8. **Getting an “automatic” response:** At various points while training this, your dog will “offer” the behavior without your “asking.” This is GREAT and should be rewarded generously, with the best treats possible and with jackpots. This is one behavior that you want your dog to volunteer, not only do when you ask. You will want to continue practicing this behavior around easier and more difficult things, food, animals, people, etc. until your dog offers it as a default behavior.