



“Leave it” cue

It is important to teach your dog to leave and walk away from something. During sniffing and exploring, dogs may find potentially dangerous hazards, such as harmful objects, poisonous substances, or wildlife. The “leave it” cue is similar to recall, in that you want your dog to stop what it is doing and return to you. The added objective with the “leave it” cue is to stop your dog picking up something, or to drop something it may have picked up, that is undesirable (such as faeces).

Before starting, it is sensible to have built a good bond and recall with your dog so they know that eye contact with you, or successful recall, leads to reward. Like with recall, the reward must be greater than the distraction, so make sure you are armed with praise and tasty treats!



1 ALWAYS START WITH TREATS

Place a treat in your hand and close it into a fist. Allow your dog to sniff your hand. Once they withdraw from sniffing and licking your hand, open your fist and reward them with the treat.

2 ADD IN THE VERBAL CUE

Now repeat the exercise, but when you present the treat in your fist, use the “leave it” command. If they wait, open your hand and reward with the treat. If they sniff or lick your hand, wait until they stop then say “leave it” again and open your hand. This allows your dog to build a positive association with stopping sniffing (i.e., attention diversion) and the command ‘leave it’.

3 ADD IN DISTRACTIONS

Once you have consistently mastered step 2 you can begin to add in distractions. To start with, place a less desirable piece of food (e.g., their normal kibble) on the floor. Standing close to your dog and the kibble, use your “leave it” cue and offer your dog the higher reward treat for doing so. If you are struggling with this step and your dog eats the food try a less tasty item, or move the food further away so that you and the higher value reward are closer to your dog than the distraction. You can also try substituting the food distraction with a toy and increase the distance between you and your dog, so that you reinforce the cue in a variety of circumstances.

4 CONTINUE PRACTICE INDOORS

When your dog picks up one of their toys you can try the “leave it” cue and offer a high value treat. Once the toy is dropped, reward with praise and the tasty treat. Leave the toy where it was dropped (picking it up may make your dog reluctant to relinquish the toy in future). If you want your dog to continue to move away from the toy, then maintain their interest by offering more treats and walking away from the toy to increase the physical distance.

5 PRACTICE OUTDOORS

Repeat step 4 in a securely enclosed outdoor space, such as a garden. Place a couple of items your dog may be interested in outside prior to starting this step. During this stage work on intercepting your dog with the "leave it" cue prior to them reaching the object. When your dog shows interest in the planted object and gets close to it, use the "leave it" cue so that they return to you (and the high value reward of a treat!) prior to grasping the object. It is important to work on this, as some items are more likely to be swallowed than dropped (e.g., faeces) so interception is key!

6 REINFORCEMENT

Now it's time to reinforce this behaviour in the real world! Through simulating with safe objects like toys, it is likely your dog will now respond to the "leave it" cue on walks when you come across rubbish (and faeces!).



Top tips:

- If at any point you are struggling to master a step, go back a few steps and reinforce those before moving on.
- Puppies explore the world through their mouths, so it is important to keep any potentially harmful items out of their way particularly whilst they are learning the "leave it" cue.
- If your dog picks up something harmful or unsuitable then avoid going towards them to take it away - this can inadvertently reinforce the behaviour as they see the item of higher value if you want it too! Instead, don't make a big deal of it and focus on offering something of higher value (e.g., a favourite toy or tasty treat).

