Teaching “Leave-it”

Teaching “Leave-it” is an essential skill for any pet owner or caregiver. This cues teaches the dog a sharp “stop-drop-turn away” response when they encounter something that could be harmful - physically or emotionally - to them. Not eating chocolate that dropped on the ground, passing discarded food wrappers on a walk, looking away from a cat that they want to chase - they are all cases where the dogs have to respond and turn away; they will NEVER get access to those things. But through the Leave-it cue, dog is alternatively learning that if they turn away from that thing they want, they will get a bigger reward from their caregiver.

Here are the steps to teach “leave it”:

1. Start with two types of treats — one high value (like cube cheese) and the other something not as exciting (like dry kibble).
2. Hold each type of treat in your hands - the high value is behind your back, the lower value is held in a closed fit towards the dog. You can also cover the kibble value treat with your hand on the floor.
3. Allow your dog to approach and sniff your hand that is holding the treat. They can lick, sniff, or nibble, but ***do not give them the treat***.
4. Wait until your dog finishes sniffing your hand and backs again.
5. As soon as your dog is done sniffing, say a verbal marker like “yes” (or click if you use a clicker) and immediately give them the high-value treat from behind your back. ***Note: never give them the low-value treat at any point.***
6. Repeat until your dog consistently stops sniffing your hand when it’s extended. As you notice they preemptively pause and stop, add in the verbal cue “leave it.”
7. Once your dog has learned to stop sniffing your hand right away when you say “leave it,” leash your dog and then toss a lower-value treat outside of their reach.
8. Wait until your dog stops sniffing and pulling toward the treat. As soon as they do this, either say “yes” or click, and then give your dog a high-value treat from your hand.

Practice this exercise several times. Over time, your dog should stop pulling as soon as you give the cue. As they master this skill, add to the difficulty by “dropping” the food or using different/higher value items as tests.

You are teaching your dog that leaving some food doesn’t mean they won’t get anything, but rather they might get something even more delicious.

Helpful Video References:

Leave-it Steps: Battersea Dog Training