

Teaching ‘Leave It’

By Sherry Woodard

Like “stay,” “leave it” is a cue that may prevent your dog from being injured and may even save his life. “Leave it” should be taught to all dogs and practiced frequently. Hazards that you want your dog to leave alone include antifreeze in a puddle; sharp bones, broken glass or any other dangerous trash on the ground; and even a dog squabble at the dog park. Your dog responding to the cue “leave it” can be the difference between you giving quick praise or heading to an emergency vet clinic.



Shade is a champ at “leave it”!

Teaching “leave it” is not difficult. Do the lessons inside your home or in an area with very few distractions. I prepare by loading a treat pouch with pea-sized, high-value treats – food the dog will find enticing but won’t take him a long time to eat. I place a boring item (something the dog has not seen before) on the floor. The item — an unopened can of human food from the kitchen, for example — will get the dog’s attention but most dogs won’t want to pick up the can.

Allow the dog to approach the can and as he starts to sniff, say “leave it” in a happy tone and pop a treat into his mouth. Change the item to something else that he probably won’t want to pick up and repeat the exercise. Try five different items, repeating the exercise, and each time move farther away from the item so the dog has to come to you to get the treat.

After using five different “boring” items and gradually increasing the distance between the dog and the treat, start using slightly more exciting items. You know your dog, so you alone know what items he would consider more interesting, but don’t jump to “high-value” items right away. To increase his chances of success at learning the cue, you want to work up to high-value items gradually. If Kleenex or a piece of plastic, for instance, would attract your dog on a walk, don’t start with those. Choose the items based on your ultimate goal: Anytime you say “leave it,” you want to be confident that your dog will indeed leave whatever it is and come to you.

The reward can change as well. If your dog has a favorite toy, squeak it and play for a moment when he comes running to you after leaving the other item of interest. Most dogs love interacting with us, so a moment of praise or play with a toy can be just as effective as a treat.

Even though you’re practicing “leave it” as a way to keep your dog safe, you want him to see it as a fun game you play. When your dog is proficient at the game in your home, start practicing in a variety of locations with more distractions.

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.

See also: [Why We Use Relationship-Based Training](#)
[Teaching Your Dog Basic Cues](#)