

Basic Training: Teaching leave it



Teaching leave it is a really useful tool that can be used to manage your dog's behaviour around things that they find exciting e.g. other dogs, children playing etc. Teaching 'leave it' enables you to break their eye contact with the distraction and the dog is rewarded for choosing the right behaviour (to look or move away). It may be that you give your dog another cue like 'sit' once you have their attention to teach them an alternative behaviour e.g. instead of running after children, I am asked to look away and sit. This learning can then be generalised to lots of different situations e.g. walking on the lead past live stock, ignoring rubbish on the floor or the neighbours cat.

Step 1: Start off in your home with a treat bag at the ready. Sit in front of your dog and every time they glance at you away from the treat bag reward them. You will need to be quick with your 'good', saying it when they look at you, then delivering them the treat. At the start it may be a quick eye flicker at you as it's not natural for dogs to offer you a lot of eye contact.

Step 2: As they become more confident at offering eye contact, you will notice them seeking out your gaze or holding eye contact for longer. They are also likely to be looking away from the treat bag quicker. If you have children that like to practice eye contact with your dog, this is a helpful way to teach your dog that eye contact with people is a positive experience.

Step 3: If your dog is struggling with this and isn't offering you eye contact or not looking away from the treat bag you can hold a treat up close to your eye to help them. You will notice them glance at your eyes away from the treat briefly, then reward them with a separate, new treat. It's important that the reward treat is different, so that your dog learns that they do not get to have what they are leaving. Gradually move your hand away from your eye until they are offering you eye contact regardless of where your hand is. You may want to stand if you have very food motivated or a large dog as they may try to reach your hand to get the treat.

Step 4: Once your dog is looking away from the treats and consistently offering you eye contact, you can add your verbal cue 'leave it', saying leave it when they offer you eye contact and following with the separate reward.

Step 5: Take a treat in your hand and each time gradually move it towards the floor, asking your dog to leave it and rewarding at each stage. Once your hand is on the floor cover the treat with your hand and ask them to leave it, reward them for any movement away from the treat or offering you eye contact.

Step 6: Gradually move your hand away from the treat asking them to leave it, being quick with your rewards if they don't go to eat the treat. If they move towards the treat, re-cover it with your hand and build it back up from there.

Step 7: Build gradually on this by being able to do this standing, then in other rooms, with different treats, with toys etc. so they start to generalise the cue to all different situations. Remember to reward.

Step 8: Build this into getting your dog to let go of their toys when playing so you can ask them to drop items if you need to. When you are playing with their toys, have treats ready in your pocket, ask them to 'leave it'. Reward your dog if they drop the toy. If they don't, show them the treat and reward when they let go of their toy. Always give them their toy back and continue playing.



Leaving items they shouldn't have

'Leave it' can be used if you need your dog to drop an item that they shouldn't have.

You must always swap it for an item they are allowed or a reward if they have left it as requested. **Never challenge your dog over items.** If you were to challenge your dog e.g. chase them and grab an item off them, this can lead to guarding behaviour. Guarding behaviour may include standing over items with a very stiff body posture, lip curling (showing their teeth), showing the whites of their eyes and growling. It is important to not punish your dog for guarding an item or do anything negative to get them to drop it. This exacerbates the problem and can increase guarding and aggressive behaviour. If your dog is guarding items, please contact us to give you a specific training programme to work through the problem.

If you are in the process of teaching 'leave it' and they will not yet leave items when asked, move away from your dog and go to another room, sound very excited about what you have found e.g. a tasty chew or treat. Your dog is likely to come and see what all the fuss is about and drop the item they have. If they have come to you still with it in their mouth hold the treat under their nose to show them what you've got. When they drop the item, throw the reward and remove the item when they aren't looking. If it is an item that won't do them any damage and isn't precious, ignore them and carry on with what you were doing.

When they have an item that is theirs, tell them how good they are and if they come to you for a game then have a quick play with them.

Managing situations like this prevents dogs from becoming possessive over items or picking up things they shouldn't have for your attention. Remember dogs are always learning so ignore behaviour you don't want and reward the right behaviour such as chewing their own toy.

If your dog steals food or other items, look at what management strategies you can put in place to prevent them from practicing the habit e.g. not leaving food on the side while the dog is unattended or if you need to go upstairs and your dog steals items, use a baby gate across the kitchen or safe area where they can be left unattended.

See 'Coping with adolescence' handout for more information.

Please do contact the **Family Dog Team** if you have difficulties with your dog stealing or guarding items.

