

Teaching “Leave it”

Teach your dog to turn away from a treat

1. Start with your dog sitting or lying down facing you.
2. Place a treat in your hand and make a fist.
3. Offer your fist, palm side up, to your dog with at least 30 cm (12 inches) of space between its muzzle and your fist. Do not move your hand towards your dog or say anything. Your dog will sniff, snort, lick, suck, and paw at your hand. Be patient.
4. As soon as your dog takes its nose away from your hand, even for a nanosecond, *immediately* open your hand, praise it, and let it eat the treat.
5. Repeat steps 2–4 until your dog no longer moves towards your fist as soon as you present it. This may take seconds, minutes, or several sessions, depending on your dog. When you present your fist and your dog sits still, backs away, or looks away, you are ready for the next step.

Add a verbal cue (command)

6. Say “Leave it” in an upbeat tone and immediately present your fist as before. If your dog does not move towards your fist, backs away, or turns away, *immediately* open your hand, praise, and let the dog eat the treat. If it sniffs or mouths, calmly withdraw your hand (do not jerk your hand away quickly), wait a few seconds, and try again. When your dog responds to “Leave it” correctly when you say it, you are ready for the next step.

Increasing the difficulty

7. Say “Leave it” and present your fist, then count to three. If your dog does not approach, turns away, or backs up, praise, open your hand, move it toward the dog, and let it eat the treat.
8. Repeat step 7 again and again until you have increased the amount of time that your dog waits for the treat to 5 seconds. Now that your dog has learned to respond to the cue “Leave it” by not touching your hand with its mouth for 5 seconds, it is ready for the next step.
9. Say “Leave it” and present a treat in your *open hand*, at least 30 cm (12 inches) away from its muzzle. If your dog does not try to get the food, praise it, and give it the treat. If it tries to get it, just close your hand. When it backs away, looks away, or turns away, repeat this step by again presenting your open hand with a treat in it while saying “Leave it.” When it backs away, looks away, or just doesn’t come forward, praise, move your hand towards it, and let it eat the treat.
10. Repeat step 9 until the dog will sit quietly for 5 seconds while you hold a treat in the palm of your hand. Now you are ready for step 11.

Generalization (making it work for other objects)

11. Place an object on the floor that your dog is not that interested in (e.g., heavy pot, book). Allow your dog to sniff it for a second, and then ask your dog to “Leave it.” When it does, praise and toss a treat about 30 cm (12 inches) away. Repeat this step again and again. Eventually, most dogs will lose interest in the item entirely and just sit and stare at the owner instead of going back to the item. When this happens, reward the dog for sitting and end the session.
12. Repeat step 11 many times with a wide variety of items. You might be able to move through multiple items in one session or you may only be able to get through one. Keep the value of the item low. For example, if your dog guards bones, don’t practice with those. You must get many successful repetitions in before you can practice with a high-value item. Practice “Leave it” throughout the day when your dog shows interest in something, even if it is something that it can have. Remember, you are just trying to get repetitions in so that you can practice. For example, if you are on a walk with your dog and it is sniffing the grass, tell the dog to “Leave it.” When the dog picks its head up, reward it. Then let it go back to sniffing. If it is carrying a toy in the house, ask it to “Leave it.” When it drops the toy, reward it and let it pick it back up. Continue in this way until the dog becomes very proficient at dropping things and lifting its head when it is sniffing things.
13. Finally, it is time to use “Leave it” with the items that cause your dog to react. Make sure that the treats that you have are better than what your dog has. Hold a toy that it has previously guarded, but can have (not a stolen item). Hold it in front of you and tell the dog to “Leave it.” Reward the dog if it hesitates, looks at you, or stops its forward movement. Toss the treat about 60 cm (2 feet) away and start over. Practice for 1–2 repetitions and then give the dog the item in its safe place. Do this once daily until the dog doesn’t go toward the item at all.
14. When the dog is proficient at this, start to put the item on the floor. When you tell the dog to “Leave it” as above and it does, toss the treat about 60 cm (2 feet) away and pick the item up. Then repeat the exercise. After two tries, give your dog the item in a safe place.
15. Practice, practice, practice!