



Leave it!

The process to teach this is a bit of "Doggie Zen"- you have to give up something good to get something better.

Before you start, you will need:

Two types of treats: one really sumptuous pile of treats your dog totally goes bonkers for, and one pile of so-so treats, just a step up from kibble.

A place to train where your dog won't be distracted.

A slightly hungry non-food aggressive dog. If your dog gets aggressive towards humans when food is involved, *do not do this exercise.*

***A clicker** (optional) to let your dog know the exact moment he does what you ask of him. You could also use what I refer to as a "magic word" like **YES!**, **GREAT!** or **GOOD!** which will also let your dog know the exact moment he does what you ask..

Here's how you do it to start (close-fisted):

- 1) Hold a treat closed-fisted two inches in front of your dog' nose. Let your dog sniff your hand but don't move it. When your dog finally moves his head away, say your magic word "GREAT", and give him the better treat *from your other hand.*

Repeat this process a dozen times.

- 2) Once he catches on, begin to say the words "LEAVE IT", as he sniffs. Whisper it. You don't need to say it roughly, but nicely, as you might say, "Thank you." Your dog is already reliably pulling away from the bait, and has the idea without you having ever said a word. Now, you're just associating the word with the behavior. That's why we add the cue AFTER the behavior is pretty well learned. Until your dog is doing it reliably, adding words only muddies up the water, confuses the dog. When your dog backs off and stops sniffing - say your magic word "GREAT!", and reward with a treat and praise.

Remember, "leave it" should be said in a neutral, non-confrontational voice. This is NOT a punisher, only a cue to tell your dog to back off at that moment in time. You are not punishing him, only giving him information.

Increasing the challenge (Open Hand Method):

- 1) Hold your open hand to your dog with the lesser value treats in it. When he begins to sniff the treats, fold your fingers up over them so your dog can't get them. If your dog is really a chowhound and totally persistent, take your hand completely away. If your dog "mugs" your hand, put your hand up over your head and ignore your dog. Make no eye contact, don't say a word- no scolding, no nothing. Just ignore your dog for a few seconds.

- 2) Then, bring the treats out in your hand again in front of your dog. Watch closely, because you're looking for the ONE moment when your dog backs off, or looks away from the treats. Chances are, when you fold your fingers over the treats, he will back off. The moment he does, click or say your magic word "Great!" and give a treat from the really, really GOOD pile. Repeat this process until your dog looks away, backs away or ignores the treats in your open palm.

- 3) Once this is happening, add the words "leave it" - said in a neutral, non-confrontational voice.

- 4) Begin to bring your hand closer and closer to the ground while rewarding any successful responses in that direction. You'll want to lower your hand toward the floor, and in several different directions. After your dog is successful, move the "leave it" game into another room, outside- wherever you can. It takes a while for dogs to learn to "generalize" behavior. Just because he knows how to "leave it" in the kitchen facing north doesn't mean he will understand he has to also do it in the bedroom facing east. So you back up a few steps, re-teach the behavior in each new environment, setting the dog up for success when applied to real life situations.

6) Once you can lower your hand and your dog will back off, put treats on the floor and watch closely! Now is when the chowhounds think "free meal" and will jump on it. Be ready to put your palm OVER the treats. You don't want the dog to get those treats because if he does, it is very strong "variable" reinforcement.

What does that mean? Well, variable reinforcement is something that happens not every time, but it has happened before and probably will happen again. Like a slot machine. You know when you put your quarter in, each pull of the handle won't net you a payoff. But you have gotten a payoff before, and you suspect you will again, so you keep on chucking in those quarters and hoping the bars will come up with three cherries. That's the power of variable reinforcement. So, you don't want your dog to get those treats on the floor without your permission creating a very powerful variable reinforcement schedule!

7) If your dog is effectively ignoring treats on the floor, you can raise the bar and walk him by the treats, saying the words "leave it" before you approach the treats on the floor. But be careful: don't tighten up on that leash involuntarily and make 'leave it' a correction. Your dog needs to make a choice. If the reinforcement prior to this experience is strong enough, he will leave the treats on the floor. If not, simply build up to that point.

Applying "Leave it" to real life:

Once your dog will reliably stop in his tracks the instant you say "leave it" in these training exercises, you can start applying it to real life. **Start out in easy situations so he can succeed.** This is very important because if you make it too difficult he may unlearn everything you've worked so hard on teaching him! You can rate your dogs' level of interest in things on a scale of 1-10. A stack of laundry might be a 1, a pair of socks a 2; a running cat probably an 8 or 9. A plate full of chicken in easy reach? Definitely a 10! Use "Leave it" on the 1's and 2's only at first. Be prepared to make a big fuss when he leaves it with lots of praise and rewards. Don't forget to also use a "magic word" like **YES!** , **GREAT!** or **GOOD!** which will let your dog know the exact moment he does what you ask..

Keep the sessions short, 5 minutes twice a day.