

Teaching "Leave It"

It's very helpful to teach your dog a phrase that means he should refrain from picking up a particular item from the ground. Begin this by holding a treat in your closed fist. Hold your hand out to your dog and say "leave it" (in a friendly conversational tone of voice, you don't need to sound threatening). Most dogs will sniff the hand, maybe mouth or paw at it. Possibly the dog will bark at you. Be patient and wait. Eventually the dog will give up and pull away from your hand. Immediately say "yes", open your fist, and reach to offer your the dog the treat. Put another treat in your hand and repeat the process. About once every 3-4 repetitions, hold the treat in an open hand and don't say "leave it". This teaches the dog that it's only when you say "leave it" that he needs to pull away from the treat. With sufficient repetitions, your dog will resist reaching for your hand when he hears "leave it".

The next step is to teach your dog to look at you in order to earn the treat. Hold the treat in your hand, say "leave it" and wait. When your dog doesn't hear "yes", he will probably look up at you. At that instant, say "yes" and offer the treat to him in your open palm. Perform at least 40 more repetitions until your dog makes direct eye contact with you when he hears "leave it". He has now learned that the way to get you to give him a treat is to look at you. To refine this behavior even more, you can delay your "yes" by a second or so at a time until your dog will stare at you for as long as 5-10 seconds before earning the "yes" and the treat.

The next step is to transfer from having the treat in your hand to placing it on the floor. When you reach this stage of training, use so-so treats for the bait and really amazing treats for rewards. So, for instance, you might place a piece of kibble or dry dog biscuit on the floor and use pieces of chicken or steak to reward your dog. Place the bait on the floor and say "leave it". Cover the bait with your hand. As above, wait until your dog stops trying to get at the bait. At the moment your dog looks at you, say "yes", remove the bait from the floor, and give the dog a really tasty treat from your other hand. Repeat this exercise at least 40 times until your dog no longer tries to get the bait from the floor but just looks up at you instead. Progress to the next step: hold your hand an inch or two

above the bait on the floor. Repeat as above. *It is imperative that you do your best to make sure the dog does not get the bait from the floor!* Occasional mistakes happen, of course, and, if your dog does manage to snatch the boring treat from the floor, say "oh too bad", show him the tasty treat you had for him (you might even want to let him sniff it) and eat it yourself!!!! (Please note that some dogs may become aggressive over food placed on the floor, as though once it is on the floor, the dog "owns" it. If you suspect your dog might do this, you should seek guidance from a certified behaviorist, veterinary behaviorist, or CPDT certified dog trainer.)

When you reach the point that you can hold your hand about six inches above the bait on the floor, place your dog on a leash and stand next to the bait. Tell him "leave it" and, if he tries to snatch the bait, use your foot to cover it. Wait for your dog to look at you, say "yes" and give him a tasty treat from your hand. With sufficient repetitions, you should be able to walk your dog up to and past baits on the floor and, when the dog hears "leave it", he should look up at you in anticipation of a really yummy treat. Be advised that if your dog is straining at the end of the leash to get at the bait, you need to repeat earlier training steps until your dog has the idea thoroughly entrenched in his brain that he should ignore what's on the floor and make eye contact with you instead.

The final training step is to generalize your dog's training to the outside world. Place baits in obvious places along your walking route and then take your dog for a walk. As you approach a bait, point at it (if necessary), tell him to "leave it", and keep walking. If he strains at the leash toward the treat, stop, out of range of the bait, and wait for him to remember that he's supposed to look at you. When he looks at you, say "yes" and give a few tasty treats while you move the dog along. Your dog will continue to improve and, as long as you do your homework and help him practice, he should respond in exactly the same manner when you come across real garbage.