Controlling Undesirable Behaviour

Dogs often exhibit behaviours that are perfectly normal for dogs but undesirable when living among humans. It is perfectly normal for dogs to chew, dig, chase cats, bark etc. Unfortunately, these behaviours do not rank highly with humans. We need a way to teach dogs how to live with humans.

In order to control undesirable behaviour exhibited by a dog I use two cues (commands):

1. Leave It
2. Ah Ah (often accompanied with a clap of hands)

Proactive Vs Reactive

I use ‘Leave It’ as a PROACTIVE cue. In other words, when I see my dog about to engage in something I consider inappropriate I immediately request a ‘Leave It’. A typical example of this is when your dog alerts to the presence of a cat. He stands bolt upright, his body stiffens and he watches for a second or two. This is your chance to use the ‘Leave It’ cue – BEFORE he chases the cat. Believe me, if he’s looking at it, he’s thinking about it!

Once your dog is already engaged in chasing the cat it’s way too late to use the ‘Leave It’ cue. You are then forced to REACT to your dog’s behaviour (a situation I loathe finding myself in). This is when I use the ‘Ah Ah’ cue. To my dog ‘Ah Ah’ means ‘Whatever you are doing at this very second, cease and desist immediately or face the consequences’. The consequence of ignoring ‘Ah Ah’ is usually a brief stint in the ‘Time-Out’ room – the toilet.

I always prefer to be PROACTIVE rather than REACTIVE when training a dog. This means it’s up to me to manage my dog’s environment and SUPERVISE my dog so that I am not forced into being reactive all the time. If I find myself saying ‘Ah Ah’ continually then I know I’m not managing or supervising my dog nearly enough. My own dog Stevie used to love to chase my Best Friend’s cats (after all, cat chasing is doggy sport). My friend (and her cats) found this highly undesirable. Therefore the first thing I had to do was manage the situation while visiting with my friend by putting Stevie on a leash or in a crate when I couldn’t supervise him. If he so much as looked at the cats I would ask him to ‘Leave It’. Of course the cats taunted him (because they’re evil) and he would occasionally lunge to the end of the lead and begin barking. This is when I used the ‘Ah Ah’ cue. If Stevie ignored me and continued lunging he would get a ‘Time-Out’ in the toilet.
Eventually Stevie learned to ignore the cats and pay attention to me in their presence. This earned him treats. When he spotted a cat and looked at me he earned treats. I’m pleased to say that he now co-exists with them very happily and no longer chases them. My friend and her cats can rest easily when we visit.

I have successfully employed the same strategy to help stop dogs chasing cars, compulsively greeting or attacking at other dogs or people on walks, herding shadows, jumping on children and sucking carpet to just name a few!

**How People Get It Wrong**

One of the biggest mistakes people make when using ‘Leave It’ and ‘Ah Ah’ is that they repeat both over and over. This causes many problems some of which are:

1. Your dog learns that he can ignore you because you will invariably repeat yourself
2. Your dog learns that the cue is now ‘Leave It, LEAVE IT, LEAVE IT!’
3. Your dog has no idea which ‘Ah Ah’ will land him a stint in time out. Depending on your tolerance level on the day, you might time him out after a single utterance of ‘Ah Ah’ or if you’re in a good mood, you might give him several chances. Your dog is then unable to predict the consequences of his actions. Learning cannot take place under these circumstances.
4. If it is a life and death situation (a snake perhaps – I’ve been there 4 times with my own dog!) you don’t get three chances at ‘Leave It’.
5. You have no credibility with your dog.

**A Final Word....**

The ‘Leave It’ cue must be taught systematically and generalised to include as many things as possible, in many different situations, among varying distractions. This can be achieved quickly with the correct training and positive reinforcement. Before embarking on this process it is wise to speak to a trainer in order to ensure you get the process right. Don’t just start commanding ‘Leave It’ and expect your dog to understand exactly what you mean.