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Barking

Barking is one of many forms of vocal communication for dogs. People are often pleased that their dog barks, because it alerts them to the approach of people to their home or it tells them there's something that the dog wants or needs. However, sometimes a dog's barking can be excessive. Because barking serves a variety of functions, **you must identify its cause and your dog's motivation for barking before you can treat a barking problem.**

Each type of barking serves a distinct function for a dog, and if he's repeatedly rewarded for his barking – in other words, if it gets him what he wants – he can learn to use barking to his benefit. For example, dogs who successfully bark for attention often go on to bark for other things, like food, play and walks. For this reason, it's important to train your dog to be quiet on cue so that you can stop his attention-related barking and teach him to do another behaviour instead – like sit or down – to get what he wants.

Many owners can identify why their dog is barking just by hearing the specific bark. For instance, a dog's bark sounds different when he wants to play as compared to when he wants to come in from the yard. If you want to reduce your dog's barking it's crucial to determine *why* he's barking. It will take some time to teach your dog to bark less. Unfortunately, it's just not realistic to expect a quick fix or to expect that your dog will stop barking altogether. (Would you expect a person to suddenly stop talking altogether?) Your goal should be to *decrease*, rather than eliminate, the amount of barking. Keep in mind that some dogs are more prone to barking than others. In addition, some breeds are known as "barkers," and it can be harder to decrease barking in these individual breeds.

Why Dogs Bark

Territorial Barking

Dogs can bark excessively in response to people, dogs or other animals within or approaching their territories. Your dog's territory includes the area surrounding his home and, eventually, anywhere he has explored or associated strongly with you: your car, the route you take during walks and other places where he spends a lot of time.

Alarm Barking

If your dog barks at any and every noise and sight regardless of the context, he's probably alarm barking. Dogs engaged in alarm barking usually have stiffer body language than dogs barking to greet, and they often move or pounce forward an inch or two with each bark. Alarm barking is different than territorial barking in that a dog might alarm bark at sights or sounds in any location at all, not just when he's defending familiar areas, such as your house, yard or car.

Attention-Seeking Barking

Some dogs bark at people or other animals to gain attention or rewards, like food, toys or play.

Greeting Barking

Your dog might be barking in greeting if he barks when he sees people or other dogs and his body is relaxed, he's excited and his tail is wagging. Dogs who bark when greeting people or other animals might also whine.

Compulsive Barking

Some dogs bark excessively in a repetitive way, like a broken record. These dogs often move repetitively as well. For example, a dog who's compulsively barking might run back and forth along the fence in his yard or pace in his home.

Socially Facilitated Barking

Some dogs bark excessively only when they hear other dogs barking. This kind of barking occurs in the social context of hearing other dogs, even at a distance – such as dogs in the neighborhood.

Frustration-Induced Barking

Some dogs bark excessively only when they're placed in a frustrating situation, like when they can't access playmates or when they're confined or tied up so that their movement is restricted.

Other Problems That Can Cause Barking*Illness or Injury*

Dogs sometimes bark in response to pain or a painful condition. Before attempting to resolve your dog's barking problem, please have your dog examined by a veterinarian to rule out medical causes.

Separation-Anxiety Barking

Excessive barking due to separation anxiety occurs only when a dog's caretaker is gone or when the dog is left alone. You'll usually see at least one other separation anxiety symptom as well, like pacing, destruction, elimination, depression or other signs of distress. For more information about this problem, please see our handout, separation anxiety.

What to Do About Your Dog's Excessive Barking

The first step toward reducing your dog's barking is to determine the type of bark your dog is expressing. The following questions can help you to accurately decide on which type of barking your dog is doing so that you can best address your dog's problem. Think about your answers to these questions as you read through the information below on the different types of barking and their treatments.

1. When and where does the barking occur?
2. Who or what is the target of the barking?
3. What things (objects, sounds, animals or people) trigger the barking?
4. Why is your dog barking?

If it's territorial barking or alarm barking:

Territorial behaviour is often motivated by both fear and anticipation of a perceived threat. Because defending territory is such a high priority to them, many dogs are highly motivated to bark when they detect the approach of unknown people or animals near a familiar place, like their homes and yards. This high level of motivation means that when barking territorially, your dog might ignore unpleasant or punishing responses from you, such as scolding or yelling. Even if the barking itself is suppressed by punishment, your dog's motivation to guard his territory will remain strong, and he might attempt to control his territory in another way, such as biting without warning.

Dogs engage in territorial barking to alert others to the presence of visitors or to scare off intruders or both. A dog might bark when he sees or hears people coming to the door, the mail carrier delivering the mail and the maintenance person reading the gas meter. He might also react to the sights and sounds of people and dogs passing by your house or apartment. Some dogs get especially riled up when they're in the car and see people or dogs pass by. You should be able to judge from your dog's body posture and behaviour whether he's barking to say "Welcome, come on in!" or "Hey, you'd better hit the road. You're not welcome at my place!" If you're dealing with a dog in the first category, follow the treatment outlined for greeting barking (below). If you're dealing with a dog in the latter category who isn't friendly to people, you'll be more successful if you limit your dog's ability to see or hear the passerby and teach him to associate the presence of strangers with good things, such as food and attention. Please see our article, desensitization and counter conditioning, for a thorough explanation of the purpose and effective use of these treatments.

For treatment of territorial barking, your dog's motivation should be reduced as well as his opportunities to defend his territory. To manage your dog's behaviour, you'll need to block his ability to see people and animals. Removable plastic film or spray-based glass coatings can help to obscure your dog's view of areas that he observes and guards from within your house. Use secure, opaque fencing to surround outside areas your dog has access to. Don't allow your dog to greet people at the front door, at your front yard gate or at your property boundary line. Instead, train him to go to an alternate location, like crate or a mat or room, and remain quiet until he's

invited to greet appropriately. (To learn how to do this, please see “go to your room” training, below.)

Alarm barking is very similar to territorial barking in that it’s triggered by sights and sounds. However, dogs that alarm bark might do so in response to things that startle or upset them when they’re *not* on familiar turf. For example, a dog who barks territorially in response to the sight of strangers approaching will usually only do so when in his own home, yard or car. By contrast, a dog who habitually alarm barks might vocalize when he sees or hears strangers approaching in other places, too. Although territorial barking and alarm barking are a little different, the recommendations below apply to both problems.

“Quiet” Training

If your dog continues to alarm bark or bark territorially, despite your efforts to block his exposure to sights and sounds that might trigger his barking, try the following techniques:

- Teach your dog that when someone comes to the door or passes by your property, he’s permitted to bark until you say “Quiet.” Allow your dog to bark three to four times. Then approach him, calmly say “Quiet,” and then prompt his silence by feeding him a steady stream of tiny, pea-sized treats, such as chicken, hot dogs, or bits of cheese. After enough repetitions of this sequence, over several days or more of training, your dog will begin to understand what “Quiet” means. You’ll know that he’s catching on if he consistently stops barking as soon as he hears you say “Quiet.” At this point, you can gradually extend the time between the cue, “Quiet,” and your dog’s reward. For example, say “Quiet,” wait 2 seconds, and then feed your dog several treats in a row. Over many repetitions, gradually increase the time from 2 seconds to 5, then 10, then 20, and so on.
- If your dog barks at people or other dogs during walks, distract him with special treats, like chicken, cheese or hot dogs, *before* he begins to bark. (Soft, very tasty treats work best.) Show your dog the treats by holding them in front of his nose, and encourage him to nibble at them while he’s walking past a person or dog that would normally cause him to bark. Some dogs do best if you ask them to sit as people or dogs pass. Other dogs prefer to keep moving. Make sure you praise and reward your dog with treats anytime he chooses not to bark.
- It may help to have your dog wear a head halter at times when he’s likely to bark (for example, on walks or in your house). A halter can have a distracting or calming effect and make your dog less likely to bark. Make sure you reward him for not barking. (**Important note:** For safety reasons, only let your dog wear the halter when you can supervise him.)
- If your dog most often barks territorially in your yard, keep him in the house during the day and supervise him when he’s in the yard so that he can’t just bark uncontrollably when no one’s around. If he’s sometimes able to engage in excessive alarm barking (when you’re not around, for example), that behaviour will get stronger and harder to reduce.
- If your dog most often barks territorially in your car, teach him to ride in a crate while in the car. Riding in a crate will restrict your dog’s view and reduce his motivation to bark.

If crating your dog in your car isn't feasible, try having your dog wear a head halter in the car instead. (**Important note:** For safety reasons, only let your dog wear the halter when you can supervise him.)

“Go to your room” Training

This training helps to teach your dog a specific behaviour to do when people come into your home so that he has fewer opportunities to alarm bark. Plus, when your dog performs his new behaviour and receives rewards, he'll learn that people coming into his and your space is a good thing.

Identify a room in your home where you'd like your dog to go when people come to the door. While the dog is in this room, give him a KONG so he'll be distracted while the visitors get settled in the house.

1. Say “Go to your room,” show your dog a treat, and throw the treat into the room where you'd like your dog to go, once your dog is in the room, close the door. Repeat this sequence 10 to 20 times. By the 10th time, try pretending to throw the treat so that your dog begins to move toward the room on his own. As soon as he's in the room, throw him the treat. As your dog catches on, you can stop making the fake throwing motion with your arm and just give him the cue, “Go to your room.” Then wait until he does and reward him.
2. Once your dog is reliably going to his room, vary where *you* are when you send him there. Practice asking him to go to his room from many different angles and distances. For example, say “Go to your room” when you're standing a few steps to the left of the room. After a few repetitions, move a few steps to the right of the spot and say, “Go to your spot” from that position. Then move to another area in the room, then another, etc. Eventually, practice standing by the front door and asking your dog to go to his room, just as you might when visitors arrive.
3. When your dog masters going to his room, give him a stuffed Kong and close the door in the room he is in. After a while, open the door and say “All done” to let your dog know it's okay to leave the room now, and he can come out and greet your guests appropriately.

Greeting Barking

If your dog barks at people coming to the door, at people or dogs walking by your property, at people or dogs he sees on walks, and at people or dogs he sees through the fence, and his barking is accompanied by whining, tail wagging and other signs of friendliness, your dog is probably barking to say hello. He most likely barks the same way when family members come home.

- Keep greetings low key. Teach your dog to sit and stay when meeting people at the door so that he has something to do instead of barking. This will reduce his excitement level. First teach him to sit and stay when there aren't any people at the door so that he knows the behaviour well before you ask him to do it with the distraction and excitement of real visitors arriving.

- If your dog likes toys, keep a favorite toy near the front door and encourage him to pick up the toy before he greets you or guests. If he learns to hold a toy in his mouth, he'll be less inclined to bark. (He'll probably still whine, however.)
- On walks, teach your dog that he can walk calmly past people and dogs without meeting them. To do this, distract your dog with special treats, like chicken, cheese or hot dogs, *before* he begins to bark (soft, very tasty treats work best). Show your dog the treats by holding them on front of his nose, and encourage him to nibble at them while he's walking past a person or dog that would normally cause him to bark. Some dogs do best if you ask them to sit as people or dogs pass. Other dogs prefer to keep moving. Make sure you praise and reward your dog with treats anytime he chooses not to bark.
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Attention-Seeking Barking

One reason that it's so easy to live with dogs is that they're very expressive. They find a way to let us know their needs. They often do this by barking or whining. Indeed, we find it desirable when they bark to ask to go outside to eliminate or to request that their water bowl be filled. It's less attractive, however, when your dog barks to demand anything and everything, needed or not! This pattern of barking does not happen by accident. A demanding, noisy dog has been taught to be this way, usually not on purpose! To get your dog to stop, you'll need to consistently *not* reward him for barking. Don't try to figure out exactly why he's barking. Ignore him instead. Treatment for this kind of barking can be tough because, most of the time, pet parents unwittingly reinforce the behaviour – sometimes just with eye contact, touching, scolding or talking to their dogs. To dogs, all of these human behaviours can count as rewarding attention. Try to use crystal-clear body language to tell your dog that his attention-seeking barking is going to fail. For example, when your dog starts to bark for attention, you can stare at the ceiling, turn away from your dog or walk out of the room. The instant your dog *stops* barking, ask him to sit and then give him what he wants, whether that's attention, play, treats, to go outside or to come in.

- To be successful, try your best to **NEVER** reward your dog for barking at you again! In some cases, it's easiest to teach your dog an alternative behaviour. For instance, if you don't want your dog to bark when he needs to go out or come in, get a doggy door installed or teach him to ring a bell hanging on a door by touching it with his nose or paw. If your dog barks to get you to play with him, teach him to bring a toy and sit in front of you. Sometimes, it's easier to avoid problems by eliminating the things that cause your dog to bark. If your dog barks to ask you to retrieve his toys from under the sofa, block the space so that the toys don't get stuck beyond his reach. If your dog barks at you when you're talking on the telephone or working on the computer, give him a tasty chew bone to occupy him *before* he starts to bark.

- You can also teach your dog to be silent on command. This will help strengthen the association between quiet behaviour and attention or rewards. Your dog should always be quiet before receiving attention, play or treats. By giving your dog a guaranteed method of getting attention, he's no longer forced to bark for attention. Regularly seek your dog out to give him attention – sweet praise, petting and an occasional treat – when he's not barking.

Compulsive Barking

Dogs occasionally become compulsive barkers, meaning they bark in situations that aren't considered normal or they bark in a repetitive, fixed or rigid way. If your dog barks repeatedly for long periods of time, apparently at nothing or at things that wouldn't bother other dogs, such as shadows, light flashes, mirrors, open doors, the sky, etc., you may have a compulsive barker. If your dog also does other repetitive behaviours like spinning, circling or jumping while barking, he may be a compulsive barker. To help reduce compulsive barking, you can try changing how you confine your dog. For instance, if your dog is tied or tethered, you can switch to keeping him loose in a safe fenced area, or if he's left alone for long periods of time, you should increase exercise, mental stimulation and social contact.

Socially Facilitated Barking

Dogs are social animals, so it's natural for them to bark when they hear others barking. You can discourage this tendency by keeping your dog indoors when other dogs are barking, by playing music to drown out the sound of other dogs, and by distracting your dog with treats or play with other dogs bark (whether it's in real life or on TV).

Excitement or Frustration Barking

Dogs often bark when they find themselves excited but dissatisfied, or frustrated, from getting to something they want. For example, a frustrated dog might bark in his yard because he wants to get out and play with children he hears in the street. A frustrated dog might bark and run the fence line with the dog next door, or bark by the patio door while watching a cat or squirrel frolicking in his yard. Some dogs bark at other dogs on walks because they want to greet and play, or they bark at their caretakers to get them to move faster when preparing to go for walks. The most effective means for discouraging excitement or frustration barking is to teach a frustrated dog to control his impulses through obedience training. You can teach your dog to wait, sit and stay before gaining access to fun activities like walks, playing with other dogs or chasing squirrels. You can also discourage the presence of cats and other animals in your yard by using motion-activated devices to startle intruders, like the "Critter Gitter" or the "Scraminal".

What NOT to Do

- Do not encourage your dog to bark at sounds, such as pedestrians or dogs passing by your home, birds outside the window, children playing in the street and car doors slamming, by saying “Who’s there?” or getting up and looking out the windows.
- Do not punish your dog for barking at certain sounds, like car doors slamming and kids playing in the street, but then *encourage* him to bark at other sounds, like people at the door. You must be consistent!
- Never use a muzzle to keep your dog quiet for long periods of time or when you’re not actively supervising him. Dogs can’t eat, drink or pant to cool themselves while wearing muzzles, so making your dog wear one for long periods of time would be inhumane. Never tie your dog’s muzzle closed with rope, cord, rubber bands or anything else. Doing this is dangerous, painful and inhumane.