

QUIET, PLEASE! My dog is barking and won't stop!

Dogs bark for a variety of reasons, sometimes it may be a welcome sound, since the dog is warning you that an intruder is entering; sometimes it is not. Most of the time, barking is a nuisance. Barking typically is not a problem until the dog will not quiet, especially when told. Some dogs by nature bark more than others.

Dogs bark as a means of communication. This communication can be a multitude of reasons, including to ward off some seen or unforeseen foe, or to attract the attention of others.

A general rule when dogs communicate with one another or to their human counterparts is "whatever works." Barking works if the dog gets what she wants or is rewarded for the behavior. The key to dealing with barking is to understand why the dog is barking, meet the dog's needs and to be able to turn it off.

Reasons Why Dogs Bark

1. Threatening, warning, aggressive barking
2. Alerting or greeting barking
3. Frustration or boredom barking
4. Fear/distress/anxiety barking
5. Separation anxiety barking
6. Demand barking
7. Play barking
8. Learned barking
9. Excitement or arousal barking
10. Compulsive barking

Key Tips to Coming up with a Plan

1. Identify why the dog is barking so you can come up with a management/training plan. Sometimes the barking can be a combination of different types, which makes the plan a bit more difficult. Dogs can have mixed feelings. Dogs can feel excitement while also being unsure.
2. Identify if there are specific times of the day and certain contexts when your dog is barking more often. For example, does your dog only bark when he is outside and left alone? Does your dog bark at you because he wants a treat from the cookie jar? Does your dog bark at other dogs when he is on a walk? Knowing this will help you come up with a treatment plan.
3. Identify if the dog has chronic stress, separation anxiety, pain or illness. If so, you should speak with your veterinarian before attempting to implement a behavioral modification plan.

Once you have Identified the Cause:

1. **Manage the environment.** Avoid allowing your dog to be exposed to things that cause him to bark. For example, if your dog barks at people passing by your home or coming onto your property, you may need to bring him inside or block visual access to passersby. Prolonged, unsupervised time outside typically results in a barking dog. Allowing your dog to bark at people makes the dog think that he needs to protect the property. Dogs that protect the property typically end up exhibiting threatening and/or aggressive behaviors towards people, whether you want them or not.

2. **Don't Let Your Dog Practice.** Dogs that excessively bark are being rewarded by someone or something. The more your dog practices this behavior, the more difficult it will be to stop. Barking becomes a habit, and not a good one. Barking can be rewarded by the environment (people passing by, as explained above) or you (giving the dog attention when he is demand barking). The more the dog practices, the better he gets at the inappropriate, nuisance behavior.

3. **Beat the Bark.** Teach your dog what to do and reward that behavior instead. If your dog is barking at people and/or dogs when you are on walks, you'll need to start to pair up the fearful trigger with something your dog loves (e.g., high value treats, toys, etc.). In order to achieve success with this protocol, you should seek the help of a veterinary behaviorist or certified trainer.

4. **Don't Reward Demand Barking.** Wants and needs are very different. If you meet your dog's behavioral needs (e.g., physical and mental stimulation) there is no reason for your dog to bark at you when he wants something. Demand barking should NEVER be reinforced by giving the dog what he wants so he'll be quiet. It's a surefire way for disaster!

5. **Anxiety Barking.** Anxiety vocalization typically occurs when a dog has been diagnosed with separation anxiety. This behavior requires the help of a professional in the field. We highly encourage you to speak with your veterinarian, a veterinary behaviorist or a certified trainer specializing in anxiety-related problems.

Avoid Punishment as a First Step

Punishment should never be your first go-to to suppress your dog's barking behavior. While punishment may temporarily stop the unwanted behavior, it is not teaching your dog what you he should do instead. This can lead to an increase in stress, anxiety or aggression. In order for punishment to be effective, one must have knowledge in learning theory and understand the risks when it is used incorrectly. Again, seeking the help of a professional is highly recommended.

Summary

Barking is a way dogs express some kind of emotion. In order to reduce the barking, you need to know why the dog is barking.

Recommended Resources:

Help! I'm Barking and I Can't be Quiet by Dr. Daniel Q. Estep and Dr. Suzanne Hetts.
Barking - The Sound of a Language by Turid Rugaas