

Barking Problems in Dogs



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Date Published: 07/17/2018

Barking Equals Communication

Dogs communicate in many ways, including body language, physical actions such as wagging the tail or biting, and vocalization such as growling or barking. Barking allows for immediate action and can occur at longer distances than other forms of communication. This is important for dogs from an instinct standpoint because body language and physical actions, such as pointing you towards an intruder or an empty dog bowl, may not be the quickest way to let you know there is an issue.

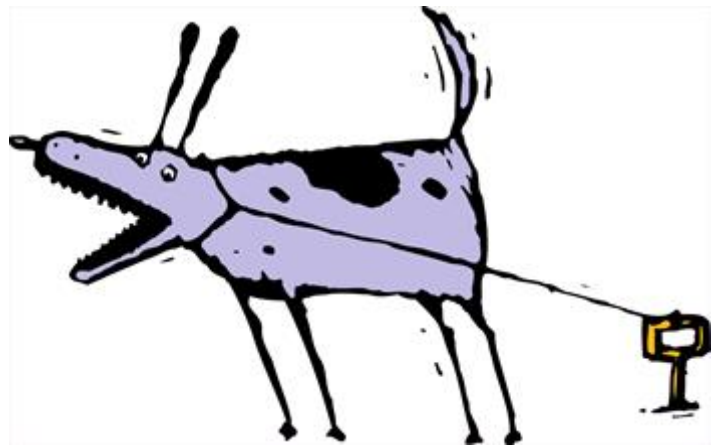


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Barking, at least from a dog's point of view, is generally never abnormal. They are communicating the best way they know how in the given situation. Unfortunately, barking is not always desired by a dog's owners. The key to resolving this dilemma is understanding why your dog is barking, and coming up with a humane and satisfactory solution for both you and your pup.

Barking triggers

Barking most commonly occurs for two reasons: as an alert or warning that something is amiss, or to draw attention to oneself in order to have a need met. In fact, depending on the dog's need, the bark itself may be completely different in tone, frequency, and/or pitch. Studies have shown that most dogs seem to understand the nature of another dog's bark upon hearing it. As you begin to learn why your dog is barking, perhaps you will too. This could be helpful in determining how to solve the cause of your dog's unwanted barking.

Common specific causes of barking include:

- Excitement/arousal
- Response to stimuli
- In greeting
- As a warning
- Fear
- Pain
- [Cognitive dysfunction/dementia](#)

- Anxiety
- Physical or mental boredom.

In addition to understanding specific causes of your dog's barking, it is also important to comprehend that some breeds tend to naturally bark more than others. A common reason for this is because of their breeding. Beagles, for example, have been bred for hunting and sounding the alarm, so to speak, when they come across prey. For that type of hunting, a good beagle is one that barks often! Also of note is that some dogs are more excitable than others; this may or may not be breed related. Such dogs may be more easily aroused or more responsive to stimulants in the environment (such as people or animals walking by the fence) than a typical dog. This can result in an excessive response to stimuli, such as frequent barking.

Multifactorial Resolution

Solving the issue of a problem barker is multifactorial and depends on the reason for the barking, your dog's environment, how motivated he is to bark, his responsiveness to training and behavioral modification, and your ability to work with your dog. You also have to keep appropriate expectations in mind. Always remember that there is a reason your dog is barking. He is not trying to be a nuisance. Equally important is to understand that since barking is a normal dog behavior, preventing all barking is unlikely and would be taking away an important communication tool from your dog.

Puppies versus Adults

Puppies may be a little easier to teach/train than adults because they haven't yet learned how to respond inappropriately. Teaching an adult dog may be a little more difficult because they have developed their own way of handling communication and must first 'unlearn' the nuisance behavior and then learn an appropriate way to communicate.

Treatment Options

Controlling a problem barker depends on the cause. Each cause of barking has a different drive behind it, so treatment will vary. Below are options to resolve unwanted barking behaviors. Your veterinarian will be of help when attempting to implement some of these changes or techniques.

- The best solution, although not necessarily the easiest, is to show your dog that you recognize the cause of the barking and address the specific issue.
- Be aware of accidentally rewarding the problem. If your dog barks when you put him outside, letting him back in (to avoid hearing him bark) is exactly what he wants you to do. Try waiting for him to quit barking, or standing outside with him until he quits barking before letting him back inside.
- [Separation anxiety](#) or *fearfulness*: Treating anxiety or fear in a dog is difficult and often involves many environmental and social changes. Increasing exercise and mental stimulation, varying the way you leave the house, very gradually increasing the time you are gone, and gently desensitizing dogs to certain elements of their fear are just a few examples of what can be done. For pets in extreme distress, medications may be helpful as a part of these new changes. Your veterinarian is an excellent resource for further diagnosis and helping your

pet through this issue.

- *Pain or cognitive dysfunction/dementia:* These problems should also be addressed by a veterinarian. The vet will be able to determine how best to handle pain or dementia-related symptoms and discuss medications that may be of help.
- *Barking for attention:* The primary goal for this type of inappropriate barking is to ignore your dog until he behaves in an appropriate manner. Do not respond to him if he is barking for your attention: you are then rewarding the behavior. Teach your dog to sit or lay down calmly in front of you and stay when he wants your attention. Reward him with verbal praise, belly rubs, or treats when he stops barking and performs the appropriate command.
- *Barking because of stimuli/arousal:* For situations such as barking at the doorbell or guests entering the home, teaching your pet to sit or lay down and stay is also extremely helpful. Teach calmness first, through sitting/laying down and staying, before gradually introducing stimuli (e.g., if he barks at cats, gradually shorten the distance between him and the cat), so he has a chance to master the new skill and use it successfully. Keeping him on a leash or a no-pull head collar, in certain situations, can also help keep him from becoming too aroused and barking excessively (e.g., when guests enter your home). Remember to reward your pet for being calm and not barking. Be careful about using a leash to control a fearful or aggressive dog around certain stimuli because being tethered with no ability to escape may worsen the barking behavior or lead to other inappropriate behaviors.
- *Avoid the stimulus:* If your dog is barking because of a specific stimulus, such as being able to see people walking past the house through the window, try blocking the window with curtains. If he barks at the sound of the doorbell, if you know when guests will be arriving keep him in a back room, away from the doorbell speaker. This technique is not necessarily a long-term solution, but it can be helpful for short-term barking issues or in combination with other treatment options.
- *Boredom:* Barking because of boredom is common and providing plenty of exercise and increasing the right kind of stimuli will help a great deal. Stimuli in this case involves helping your dog use his brain by playing games with him, such as chase or hide-and-seek, or giving him interactive toys such as Kongs with treats inside. It may also be helpful for you to do these activities together at the same time every day so you can establish a consistent routine. For boredom-based inappropriate barking, obedience training can also be helpful.
- *Distraction:* Distracting your pet from the object of his bark while using an appropriate reward system may help prevent barking with time. Distraction involves offering treats while he is barking or using noise distraction, such as shaking a soda can with beans in it or blowing a high-pitched whistle. The problem with distraction techniques is that they don't resolve the cause of the barking. Offering treats to a pet while he is performing an unwanted behavior

tends to just reward him for the unwanted behavior. Noise distractions may inadvertently increase the pet's arousal and might even make him bark more frequently or louder in order to be heard. If a pet is barking from fear, noise distractions may startle him and make him more fearful rather than preventing the barking behavior. If distraction techniques are attempted, using a specific cue word for silence, such as saying "quiet" firmly, may be helpful to enhance the appropriate behavior. Once the dog is quiet, be sure to reward him swiftly and thoroughly. If this method is successful without causing distress to your dog, make sure to enforce the cue word often and reward every time your dog doesn't bark.

- ***Punishment:*** Avoid any kind of verbal or physical punishment. For attention-seeking dogs, any kind of attention is a reward, even punishment. For fearful or anxious dogs, punishment will likely lead to more fear and anxiety and possibly new inappropriate behaviors. For dogs responding to excess stimuli, the addition of yelling or hitting only leads to further heightening their arousal and may worsen the barking.
- ***Bark collars:*** Bark collars are training collars that either produce an electric shock, loud beep, or release a noxious but harmless spray, such as citronella, when a dog barks. **They do not resolve the underlying cause of your pet's barking** and often cause more harm than good. Another issue with using bark collars is that for dogs that bark because of distress, such as those barking out of fear, bark collars can cause them to become even more afraid after being startled or shocked by the collar. Shock collars specifically are known to create fear responses (which may or may not be aggressive in nature) because of the pain associated with the shock. This may make the barking behavior worse or create new unwanted behaviors. Citronella bark collars appear to be the most humane option of the different types of bark collars, but again, without addressing the underlying issue or in cases where fear/anxiety is the problem, they may not be appropriate for your dog's barking behavior. Additionally, dogs barking consistently for other reasons, even those not in distress, can actually learn to bark at a lower frequency to avoid triggering the collar.

Tackling the problem of unwanted barking in your dog is challenging but can be incredibly rewarding. Oftentimes, by using many of the techniques provided above, you and your dog will become closer and have a better relationship. Contact your veterinarian with any questions or concerns.

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