

The Barking Dog

Barking is a normal behavior for dogs but can become a serious problem for owners, potentially leading to eviction, legal action or relinquishment of the dog. There are many different normal motivations that will cause dogs to bark, including territorial defense, fear, play, social facilitation and learned barking. Be aware that your dog may have different reasons for barking at different times. Genetics plays a role in barking as well, and some breeds are more predisposed to excessive barking than others. There are some very rare and complex disorders that can lead to barking, including compulsive disorders, vocalization stereotypies and barking secondary to separation anxiety. If you feel that the normal motivations for a barking listed below do not match your dog's behavior, please discuss your concerns with a veterinarian.

Why your dog barks

- Fear or anxiety
 - o Watch your dog when it is barking to determine if fearful body language is shown. This may include some or all of the following: tail tucked or low and wagging, ears down and back, eyes diverted away from feared object with the white of the eye showing, lips retracted horizontally, lip licking, panting, leaning back and away from the stimulus
- Territorial defense
 - o Your dog barks at people or dogs approaching its territory (including your house and possibly your car or the area around your dog when on leash)
- Learned barking ("attention-seeking")
 - o Many dogs bark to get a desired reaction from their owner (attention, food, to get inside or outside the house, etc.); barking will increase if the dog successfully elicits the desired reaction
- Social Facilitation
 - o Dogs bark in response to stimulation from other barking dogs
 - o Play barking occurs when your dog is playing (with another dog, person, a toy, etc.)

What you can do to stop your dog from barking

- Make sure your dog has plenty of physical activity and mental stimulation!
- Avoid situations that cause your dog to bark as much as you are able
- Teach your dog some attention games so that you can easily interrupt undesired behavior
 - o "Come": This helps you get your dog's attention even in a high-arousal situation
 - o "Target": Teaching your dog to touch its nose to your hand or an object on command will also allow interruption of undesired behavior and focus your dog's attention on you

- Positively reinforce desired behavior
 - o Praise your dog and give treats when your dog is quiet!
 - o Teach a “Quiet” command
 - Stage situations where your dog will bark; when barking stops reward the quiet behavior and begin to associate it with a “quiet” command
 - If you have difficulty interrupting the barking, use a head halter to close your dog’s mouth and stop the barking
- Desensitization and counter-conditioning to the triggers
 - o These techniques allow you to address the underlying stimulus that causes your dog to bark and are especially useful if your dog is fearful
 - o Desensitization: in this technique the inciting stimulus is very slowly introduced in such a way that the dog never reacts; the intensity of the stimulus is increased over time, but never rapidly enough to elicit barking
 - o Counter-conditioning: the goal of this technique is to replace a negative response to a stimulus with a positive response by pairing rewards with the aversive stimulus
- Bark collars
 - o The use of bark collars is controversial and can cause stress
 - o Bark collars should never be used in a dog that is anxious or fearful

Some things NOT to do

- Do not reward your dog for barking
 - o The reward your dog is seeking may be your attention (even if you get mad!), a treat, getting in or out of the house, etc.
 - o Terminate play when your dog barks in order to teach your dog that barking during play is inappropriate
- Do not yell – loud noises may likely encourage more barking
- DO NOT PUNISH YOUR DOG if the motivation for barking is related to fear or anxiety; this will increase the level of fear and worsen problem

These are general recommendations for barking dogs. More information for treating specific motivations can be sought from your veterinarian.

*Handout created as part of a class exercise by veterinary students:
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