

Barking

Barking is the result of either anxiety, fear, or genetics. If you own a breed that is known to bark, then work on teaching your dog the “quiet” command (see below), provide plenty of outlets, and provide toys to keep them busy.

Anxiety-related barking, especially if it is a new behavior, may be the result of an underlying medical issue, so the first thing you should do is take your dog to the vet. If everything checks out medically, the second thing you need to do is determine when your dog barks, for how long your dog barks, and what is causing him to bark. If your dog barks when you are not home, ask your neighbors, drive or walk around the block then watch and listen for a while, or start a tape recorder or video camera when you leave for work. Hopefully you will be able to discover which of the following anxiety related problems is the cause of your dog’s barking.

Social Isolation/Attention Seeking

Your dog may be barking because he’s bored and lonely if:

- He’s left alone for long periods of time without opportunities for interaction with you.
- His environment is relatively barren, without playmates or toys.
- He’s a puppy or adolescent (under 3 years old) and does not have other outlets for his energy.
- He’s a particularly active type a dog who needs a “job” to be happy.

Recommendations

Expand your dog’s world and increase his “people time” in the following ways:

- Walk your dog daily – it’s good exercise for both of you.
- Teach your dog to fetch a ball or Frisbee and practice with him as often as possible.
- Teach your dog a few commands and/or tricks and practice them every day for five to ten minutes.
- Take an obedience class with your dog. Make sure to choose a trainer who uses positive reinforcement training methods. These trainers will steer clear of prong collars, choke chains, and electric collars.
- Provide interesting toys to keep your dog busy when you’re not home (Kong-type toys filled with treats or busy-box toys). Also try rotating the toys to make them seem new and interesting.
- If your dog is barking to get your attention, make sure he has sufficient time with you on a daily basis (petting, grooming, playing, and exercising), so he doesn’t have to resort to misbehaving to get your attention.
- Keep your dog inside when you’re unable to supervise him.
- If you work very long hours, take him to a doggie daycare or have a friend or neighbor walk and/or play with him.
- Never give your dog attention while he is barking. Ignore him until he stops for at least three seconds, then reward with attention and/or treats.

Frustration/Learned

Your dog may be barking due to frustration or as a learned behavior if:

- The barking occurs in the presence of “strangers” seen through the window and/or fence or when on leash. It may include the mail carrier, children walking to and from school, and other dogs or neighbors in adjacent yards.
- Your dog’s posture while he’s barking appears threatening – tail held high and ears up and forward.
- You’ve encouraged your dog to be responsive to people and noises outside.

Recommendations

- Teach your dog the “quiet” command. When he begins to bark at a passer-by, interrupt him, without calling his name or startling him. You can also wait for him to take a breath. The moment he is quiet reward him with a high value treat. You can also use clicker training to teach the “quiet” command by clicking and treating when he is quiet (see our handout: “Dog Clicker Training”). The more times he is rewarded for being quiet the more often he will be quiet. Once he is starting to understand the behavior of being quiet, you can start to use the “quiet” command. Avoid yelling “quiet” before your dog actually knows the command.
- Counter-condition your dog to the stimulus that triggers the barking. Teach him that strangers are actually friends and that good things happen to him when these people are around. By giving him a treat when he sees someone new, your dog will learn to association good things and be less likely to bark. Use a high value food reward such as little pieces of cheese or meat and every time your dog sees a new person, reward him with these high value treats. It may take several sessions before a person can come close without your dog barking. When a person does finally get close enough without your dog barking, have them feed him the treats or throw a toy for him. In order for this technique to work however, you’ll have to make sure your dog doesn’t see new people between sessions.
- Limit the dog’s access to views that might be causing him to bark when you are not home, by closing the blinds or curtains.
- If your dog barks while inside the house when you’re home, redirect his attention by having him obey a command, such as “sit” or “down,” and reward him with praise and a treat.
- Don’t inadvertently encourage this type of barking by enticing your dog to bark at things he hears or sees outside.
- Have your dog spayed or neutered to decrease frustration.

Fears and Phobias

Your dog’s barking may be a response to something he is afraid of if:

- The barking occurs when he’s exposed to loud noises, such as thunderstorms, firecrackers, or construction equipment.
- Your dog’s posture indicates fear – ears back, tail held low.

Recommendations

- Identify what is frightening your dog and desensitize him to it (see out handouts: “Helping Your Dog Overcome the Fear of Thunder and Other Startling Noises”).
- Mute noise from outside by leaving your dog in a basement or windowless bathroom and leave on a television, radio, or loud fan. Block off your dog’s access to outdoor views that might be causing a fear response, by closing curtains or doors to certain rooms.

Separation Anxiety

Your dog may be barking due to separation anxiety if:

- The barking occurs only when you’re gone and starts as soon as, or shortly after, you leave.
- Your dog displays other behaviors that reflect a strong attachment to you, such as following you from room to room, frantic greetings, or reacting anxiously to your preparations to leave.
- Your dog has recently experienced a change in the family’s schedule that results in his being left alone more often such as a move to a new house, the death or loss of a family member or another family pet, or a period at an animal shelter or boarding kennel.

Recommendations

Separation anxiety may be resolved using counter-conditioning and desensitization techniques (see our handouts: "Separation Anxiety"). This behavior issue may require professional training from a certified dog trainer or certified animal behaviorist.

What Not to Do

We do not recommend the use of bark collars. Bark collars are specially designed collars that deliver an aversive whenever your dog barks. There are several different types of bark collars: citronella collars, aversive sound collars, and electric shock collars. If your dog is barking due to anxiety, using any form of aversive will not solve the problem; rather it will make the anxiety worse.

We especially do not recommend an electric shock collar. The shock is painful for your dog and can result in redirected aggression towards people or other pets that may be around the dog when shocked.

The other main drawback of bark collars is that they do not address the underlying cause of barking. You may be able to eliminate the barking itself, but symptom substitution may also occur, resulting in your dog digging, escaping, or becoming destructive or even aggressive.