



Barking

Barking is a form of communication for dogs and they bark for a variety of different reasons. Dogs bark to alert people to changes in the environment, to initiate play, to gain access to going out and even to garner our attention. **Barking is absolutely a normal dog activity.** Sometimes, though, barking is excessive and becomes more of a problem and less of a communication form. To successfully decrease barking, it is helpful to understand your dog's motivation for barking and what they get out of practicing the behavior. Keep in mind the goal is to reduce the undesirable barking behavior and keep it polite, not eliminate it. **It is just as unrealistic to ask your dog to never bark as it is to ask a person to never speak.** Below are some reasons that dogs bark and strategies to help minimize that type of barking.

- **Boredom or Frustration Barking**

Employ physical and mental exercise. If your dog is barking because they are bored, they will benefit from an increased activity level. Taking a long sniff walk lessens boredom and has the added benefit of increased socialization. Doing a brief training session or incorporating food and puzzle toys in their lives helps your dog relax mentally. When your dog is physically and mentally relaxed, they are more likely to take a nap than engage in barking.

- **Attention Seeking Barking**

Despite how barking might make you feel, dogs don't generally bark without a reason – occasionally we just don't know what that reason is. Sometimes, your dog may be barking because they physically need something, like a potty break or water. Unfortunately, some dogs learn that barking can not only get them what they need, but also what they want. Attention seeking barking is an important way for your dog to communicate that they need something. It becomes a problem when they start to bark for things that they want. Your dog doesn't always have to have your undivided attention, nor does he get to demand food or treats or play. It is difficult, but the best way to address demand-based barking is to ignore it. When your dog stops barking, reward them! Using sticky or chewy treats helps with this as they can't go right back to barking. If you yell at your dog, look at your dog or interact with your dog in any way when they are demand barking, you are reinforcing that behavior by giving your dog what they want.

- **Environmentally Reinforced Barking**

This type of barking may be territorial in nature. If your dog barks every time a stranger passes your home or whenever the mailman delivers your mail, odds are that they are being reinforced by the situation. Your dog wants the person to go away. They bark, and the person leaves - success! This type of barking is very rewarding for your dog. To reduce this type of barking, try to prevent your dog from practicing the behavior. For example, if your dog is looking out a window and barking, you will want to prevent access to that window.

- **Fear or Anxiety Barking**

Most dogs will bark at things that startle, scare, or excite them. With proper socialization, the things that fall into those categories should be few and far between. When exposing your dog to new people or situations that make your dog anxious, you cannot go wrong with pairing the potentially scary stimulus with a tasty treat. Fear is an emotional response and emotions cannot be reinforced. Treat



your dog as you would treat a frightened child: with support and encouragement. Helping your dog become more comfortable around new things by heavily rewarding them will help this type of barking. You should start rewarding your dog as soon as they see the scary stimulus, but ideally, before they start barking.

- **Alert Barking**

Dogs are keenly aware of changes in their environment. Your dog often lets you know when someone is at the front door. They might bark when the garage door opens or when they hear your neighbor's car door close. This is all normal, and in many cases, welcomed. Sometimes you won't be able to sense what sets your dog to barking. In this type of barking, it is useful to acknowledge that your dog performed his self-assigned job and then direct him to do something else. Determine how many barks are okay and then interrupt your dog. You might say "Thank you", or "Quiet" and then reward your dog for doing an alternate behavior like laying down or fetching a toy. You can then start specifying what types of things are good to alert you about by what alerts you reward. For example, if your dog alerts you when someone is at the door, you would like that to continue and you reward. You are not, however, as concerned about the plastic bag that blew across your front yard, so give no reward. Your dog will learn that certain things are more worth paying attention to than others.

Regardless of why your dog is barking, there are some simple things you can do to help reduce the occurrence whether at home or in class:

1. **Use a hand Target:** This helps you redirect your dog away from the stimulus for the barking. It also prevents your dog from making eye contact with other people or other dogs. Prolonged eye contact can increase barking.
2. **Use a high rate of reinforcement:** Rewarding frequently can reinforce quiet behavior, help an anxiety barker feel more secure and redirect a dog that is barking due to excitement, frustration or territorial tendencies. Using a stuffed Kong can be especially useful when your dog is in an overstimulating situation.
3. **Breathe and try to remain calm:** If you respond with anger, embarrassment or frustration, your dog may sense those emotions and respond by barking more.
4. **Use a visual barrier:** When your dog can't see the reason for their barking, it is easier to get them to engage in something else.
5. **Try dropping treats on the ground for your dog:** This technique encourages your dog to look down and engages them in sniffing, which can be a very soothing activity for your dog.
6. **Try to satisfy your dog's need:** If they need space, move away from the challenging person, dog or thing. If your dog is high energy and excited, do some mental and physical activity.
7. **Use a calming aid:** If your dog's barking is motivated by stress or anxiety, ask your trainer about the calming solutions available.

Always keep in mind that barking and body language are the means by which your dog communicates. Try to listen to what your dog is telling you. When you understand the motivation behind the barking, you will be better able to help reduce your dog's barking and build your relationship with them in the process.