

How to Address Increased Vocalization (Barking)

BACKGROUND

Barking is a self-rewarding behavior in dogs and a normal form of communication. Dogs bark for a variety of different reasons; to effectively stop or control barking, the underlying motivation needs to be determined.

Different reasons why dogs bark include:

- Alert or territorial barking (towards a familiar person or dog; a warning that someone or something is coming near)
- Attention-seeking (to get attention)
- Play barking (solicit play)
- Fear and anxiety induced barking (including separation)
- Learned or conditioned barking
- Lack of exercise and mental stimulation (boredom)
- Medical causes (cognitive decline, pain)

GETTING STARTED

To determine the underlying motivation behind your dog's barking, it is important to pay close attention to when the barking occurs and what your response is to your dog. Remember that your response (even punishment) can inadvertently reinforce barking. Keeping a log will help to identify triggers for your dog's barking and ultimately the motivation. Note not only what your dog is barking at but also your dog's body language, your response to the barking, and what occurs immediately before the barking ends. Remember that dogs have a wider range of hearing than humans. Barking at noises or particular smells that we humans cannot readily detect is not uncommon.

TROUBLESHOOTING BEFOREHAND

As with any behavior, a complete physical examination and any warranted diagnostic tests should be performed by your veterinarian to rule out medical causes for barking. Concurrent behavioral conditions (i.e., separation anxiety, confinement anxiety, generalized anxiety, noise phobias, fear-based aggression, and territorial aggression) need to be addressed and treated before addressing the barking. Also, it is important to take the breed of dog into consideration when troubleshooting excessive vocalization. Some dogs were specially bred for their barking ability, including herding breeds such as Shetland sheepdogs, Australian shepherds, and border collies or hounds such as beagles.

PROCEDURE

- Identify and eliminate the cause of the bark:
 - Use the journal to: record all incidents of barking—can you identify a trigger? Does the barking occur at a certain time every day? How long does each bout of barking last?
- Avoid stimuli that induce barking
 - If your dog barks at what he sees happening outside the window, prevent access to the windows by using gates, blinds, or window clings.
 - Use white noise, fans, a radio, or TV to reduce outside noises that trigger barking.
 - If stimuli cannot be avoided, pair the presence of stimuli with a high value treat to help the dog make a positive association with the stimuli.

- Is the bark a new habit? If so, recent changes (including: scheduling, vehicles, neighbors, seasons) may help explain the onset of the bark, and modification of these changes may decrease barking.
- Is your pet older than 7 years and displaying any of the following signs: decreased awareness of people and places, lapse in house training, altered sleep patterns, new-onset bouts of aggression? If so, cognitive dysfunction (senility) or pain may play a role in barking, especially if the bark is not clearly directed at anything identifiable to you.
- Does your dog systematically bark more than other dogs but interact well with other dogs and with all members of the family? If so, that amount of barking may be normal for your dog but inappropriate for the context (for example, living in an apartment with neighbors that are bothered by the noise). In this case, specific interventions that seek to decrease barking may be useful.
- Desensitize the dog to the stimuli. This means identifying the trigger that results in barking and repeating it at a very low level, then gradually increasing the intensity while praising lavishly when the dog does not bark. An example is barking when there is a knock at the door. For desensitization, simply record the knock and replay it at a lower volume. When your dog does not bark, give him/her extensive praise. However, when he/she does bark, distraction/diversion is the best response: offer him/her a chew toy that contains food (e.g., Kong toy), requiring him/her to use the mouth and therefore making barking at the same time impossible. Scolding or reprimanding systematically fails to improve the outcome of barking in dogs and should not be used.
- Reward quiet behavior. This is in the form of praise, toys, play, a treat, or extra attention, as examples.
- If barking occurs primarily when your dog is alone, it may be associated with loneliness, or boredom. Doggy daycare, even once or twice a week, may prove very helpful. If your dog has separation anxiety, medical intervention to relieve anxiety might be very helpful.

AFTERWARDS

Keep in mind barking is never improved with yelling or physical punishment; if the dog is fearful then yelling and punishment is likely to increase a dog's anxiety, which may result in aggression. Dogs that bark playfully will simply bark more as their arousal level increases and attention is given to them. Punishment that occurs when you are present often is ineffective. Barking often continues in your absence because there are no consequences if no one is there to correct the behavior.

Anti-bark devices and citronella collars should only be used after consulting with your veterinarian or a veterinary behaviorist. Such devices rarely provide permanent solutions, especially if the dog is barking out of fear or anxiety. The most effective way to reduce barking is to immediately and consistently interrupt the barking pattern with diversionary or distractive activities. Make sure your dog's basic needs are being met. This includes adequate exercise (minimum 30 minutes of structured exercise daily- Frisbee, throwing the ball, going for a jog) and social interactions with people and other dogs.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

My dog only barks when I leave the house. What can I do?

A dog that barks when an owner leaves the house may suffer from separation anxiety. This is especially likely if the barking is accompanied by destructive behavior (chewing or destroying furniture/walls, excessive salivation, etc.). Separation anxiety is a complex disorder that often requires treatment with medications, and barking in this context should be brought up with your veterinarian or with a veterinary behaviorist (see above) as soon as possible.

Food dispensing, puzzle toys, snuffle mats, and other enrichment devices can distract a dog and divert the dog's attention away from a stimulus for barking. Kong and other similar toys are available at pet stores and online; you simply place part of your dog's daily meal and/or a treat within the toy. A dog's gradual removal of the food from inside the toy will be mentally stimulating and perfect for when you need to leave your dog or maybe just need a little quiet time.

Does crate training help to stop barking?

Crates (carriers with a door that latches and that are kept inside the home) can provide a "safe" sanctuary for dogs. If your pet is

feeling insecure and barks consistently, a crate may help reduce or possibly eliminate the barking. For this to be successful, your dog needs to be comfortable and relaxed in the crate. The crate should never be used for punishment (this includes time-outs) and feeding your dog in the crate, leaving the crate door open at all times, and placing the crate in a comfortable and busy part of the home can help to ensure that your dog will find the crate to be a safe, secure location.

What about surgery to stop barking?

These types of surgical procedures are an extreme last resort and should be avoided unless euthanasia is the only other option. The surgery does not completely stop the noise of barking, but only makes the dog sound hoarse. This surgery, which carries medical risks, attempts to take away a normal, natural behavior for the dog. Despite the procedure, the dog will continue to bark; it will simply sound different. This surgery does not address the underlying cause for the barking but instead simply reduces the noise for neighbors.

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