



## Help! My Dog's Barking is Driving Me Crazy!

Barking is a normal canine behaviour – but it is one of those behaviours that often bring our dogs into conflict with human expectations. You can teach your dog to curb his barking – but there are many things people do that actually increase barking so be sure to review this information carefully. Be patient with your dog as you take steps to moderate his barking behaviour.

### Understand Why Your Dog Barks

- Excitement** - dogs that are excited / aroused will often bark. You will often see this when playing with your dog (or when your dog is playing with other dogs) as the dog gets more and more aroused.
- Attention seeking** – dogs that have learned that barking garners them attention will use it as a strategy to get your attention.
- Fear / Anxiety** – dogs that are fearful / have limited socialization will often bark when they are experiencing stress. Barking can help alleviate stress to some extent and this strongly reinforces the barking. Fearful barking can also be a means to get your attention. Fear based barking will often be triggered by predictable stimuli and accompanied by other physical signs that the dog is anxious.
- Boredom** – bored dogs may bark for attention or simply to alleviate their boredom
- Unintentional reinforcement of barking** – many things people do to try to stop barking actually inadvertently reinforce barking. This is particularly true for dogs that are attention seeking. Remember than any attention (not just praise and cookies) can reinforce behaviours
- Alert barking** – some dogs will habitually bark when something unusual happens. Some breeds are more likely to do this. By barking, the dog is trying to tell you something important to him.
- Predatory barking** – barking occurs when the dog is chasing prey, or confronting something that might be prey.
- Territorial barking** – the dog barks when in his yard, or in the car, in his crate when people or animals approach.
- Separation anxiety** – barking occurs when the dog's familiar people are absent. Other separation related behaviours may also be present (chewing, digging, pacing etc.)
- Dementia** – dogs that develop Canine Cognitive Dysfunction may bark for no apparent reason.
- Deafness** – deaf dogs may bark for all the same reasons that hearing dogs bark but some deaf dogs will bark simple because of their deafness – as if they are trying to hear something or alleviate the lack of sound in their world.

- Genetics** – some breeds are more likely to bark than others. Non-breed based genetics may also contribute to higher levels of barking (the mother or father were big time barkers – puppies are more likely to bark).

## **So, understanding why your dog barks is nice – but what on earth can you do about it?**

Remember that dogs do not see the world in terms of good or bad (moral qualities). They see the world in terms of **what works and what doesn't**. If your dog is continuing to bark – there is something about barking that is **working** for them. Note that this also implies that there is a **need** that is underlying the behaviour.

It is our job to try to figure out what that need is, and how barking is working for them.

The first step is to try to clearly elucidate the conditions in effect when your dog barks. Keeping a bark journal for a week or so can help you identify trends, times and triggers - and you can use these to help put measures in place to minimize barking.

Keep note of:

- Time of day
- Location – be specific (e.g. living room – dog in the front window, on the back of the couch, outside in the yard, on a walk, passing by a specific house)
- What was the dog doing when barking began? (e.g. looking out the window, sleeping, eating, running along the fence etc.)
- What is going on in the background? (e.g.: who is home, what background noise is present? What are people and other animals in the home doing when the barking begins? etc.)
- What potential triggers might have started the barking? (e.g. postman comes up the walk, passing cars, passing dogs etc.)
- How long did the barking persist?
- Does the dog display any other behaviours? (e.g. pacing, racing, cowering, hackles raised etc.)

While keeping the journal, try your best to completely ignore the barking so you can determine what happens naturally.

## **Anti-barking strategies**

The following is a list of different things you can use / do to help address barking. Which you use may, in part, be dependent on the reasons for barking. However many of these are useful broadly for all kinds of barking.

1. **Eliminate reinforcement for barking.** The first and fundamental step for addressing barking is to ensure that you are not inadvertently reinforcing barking behaviours. Reinforcement can come from ANY attention you give to the barking – yelling, shushing, picking the dog up, talking, eye contact, the list goes on and on. When your dog barks try to remove ALL attention from him. This is especially critical if you

have been responding to the barking by doing things that have not been working. The fact that barking is continuing proves that reinforcement is going on. (see note below on Extinction Burst!)

2. **Eliminate cues for barking.** When you can identify specific cues for barking you can then start to look at ways to eliminate the cues. Strategies may include crating your dog in a quiet spot at the time of day when the postman typically arrives, removing window access for dogs that bark at any movement on street (barricade dog in another part of the house, use self adhesive frosting material to reduce visibility out the lower portions of windows, using white noise to reduce barking in response to ambient sounds etc.)
3. **Get help with counterconditioning / desensitization for anxious dogs.** The goal is to change your dog's emotional response from anxiety to happy anticipation to things that currently trigger his anxiety and barking. There are training methods to help you – these are beyond the scope of simple obedience / training classes but a good trainer can help you on a private basis. A visit to a veterinary behaviourist may also be in order, especially for dogs that have significant anxiety issues.
4. **Put barking on cue.** This seems counterintuitive – your dog already barks too much, why on earth would you want to put barking on cue? The key here is that behaviours that are placed on cue tend to diminish off cue. Here is the url for a blog that shows how to do this. In this example you will be teaching 'speak' and 'shhh' together. Dogs tend to learn 'pairs of opposites' like this well together. [https://smartdog.typepad.com/smart\\_dog/2010/06/how-to-teach-speak-and-shhhh.html](https://smartdog.typepad.com/smart_dog/2010/06/how-to-teach-speak-and-shhhh.html)
5. **Teach a quiet cue.** There are several different ways to approach this.
  - a. When your dog is barking – say 'quiet' or 'shhh' and wait for a TINY pause in the barking – even just your dog taking a breath. CLICK and reinforce with something fabulous. Repeat over and over. Watch for your dog interrupting his barking more promptly when you give your quiet cue and jackpot this cue response with a treat party! Be careful when you say quiet to do so in a low / soft pitch. Do not try to outcompete your dog in decibel level as this may actually reinforce the barking.
  - b. A slight variation on (a), is to simply wait for a brief pause to occur in the barking – click and treat, repeat. After 15-20 repetitions start pairing the cue "shhh" with the behaviour....when you can see that your dog is about to offer a moment or two of no barking, give the 'shhh' cue and click and treat. After another 15-20 repetitions try giving your 'shhh' cue while the dog is barking. If he pauses, click and treat.
  - c. Use the 'pair of opposites' approach under #4
  - d. You can teach your dog quiet in the absence of barking by giving your quiet cue when he is being quiet. Say 'shhh' and click after a second or two of quiet. Repeat many times in the absence of barking. You need to practice this with the dog in many different positions, places, and circumstances so that the dog has an opportunity to learn what exactly you are clicking for. (It is much more challenging for your dog to recognize that you are making the absence of something, rather than a specific action.) After 2-300 successful repetitions, try introducing it while the dog is barking to see if he responds.

If he does, be sure to give him a fantastic jackpot / treat party. If he does not, I would recommend using one of the other approaches.

6. **Acknowledge the barking** – this is particularly for dogs that alert bark. My terriers are very aware of anything going on in the yard and feel the need to tell me about it. When they start barking, I acknowledge it with “thank you – got it”. Often this is all they need to stop the barking.
7. **Use a positive interrupter** – a positive interrupter is a specific sound that you classically condition to mean ‘come to me for something fabulous’. You can use it to interrupt any behaviours you do not want your dog to do. Used consistently at the onset of any barking, you can even pattern your dog to come to you when he starts to think about barking (and this in itself may stop the barking). When using the positive interrupter in this context I recommend that after you reinforce your dog for coming to you, you then ask your dog for a series of reinforceable behaviours such as – sit (mark and reinforce), down (mark and reinforce), touch (mark and reinforce) etc. Spend at least 60 seconds working with your dog. This will help reduce the likelihood that he simply goes back into bark mode. URL for positive interrupter: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TBvPaqMZyo8>
8. **Build in more enrichment into your dog’s day** – this is particularly important for dogs that are barking due to boredom. Look for appropriate food dispensing toys so that meal times become events – rather than 60 seconds of rapid gulping. Teach your dog to hunt for his dinner by laying kibble trails or hiding his food in small caches. Play with your dog using interactive toys. Do some training every day. Use ‘sniffari’ walks – walks where you go at your dog’s pace and allow him to choose the direction.
9. **Include ‘quiet’ into your SMART 50 program** – be sure to reward your dog generously and give him attention when he is being calm and quiet – especially if you notice that your dog has not barked in response to one of his cues.
10. **Teach relax on a mat** – a very strong ‘relax on a mat’ behaviour can help your dog by teaching him that relaxation is something he can do voluntarily and that it is a reinforceable behaviour. If you have this solidly trained, you may be able to use it to pre-empt barking that occurs at predictable times by sending your dog to his mat. You may even be able to send your dog to his mat when barking begins. Be sure to reinforce generously if you are using it to interrupt barking.
11. **Other relaxation aides** – your dog may benefit from a thundershirt if barking episodes are caused by anxiety and the triggers are predicatable in timing. A little lavender spray or DAP in the room or on bandana may be of benefit in anxiety related barking as part of a more comprehensive approach.
12. **If your dog is barking as a part of separation anxiety** – get professional help from a good trainer and a veterinary behaviourist.
13. **If you think your dog might have Canine Cognitive Dysfunction** – talk to your vet and consider referral to a veterinary behaviourist.

### **The bad news (Extinction Burst)**

When you start working on barking you may bump up against an ‘extinction burst’ – this happens when a previously reinforced behaviour is now being ignored. Because of that tremendous history of prior reinforcement through attention (remember attention can be

anything you do from making eye contact, to shouting 'quiet'), the barking will actually **increase in intensity on a temporary basis**. Your dog is basically saying – 'this worked before, it is not working now so I need to try harder'. The problem is that 'temporary' can seem like a long time when your dog is engaging in an undesirable / annoying behaviour. The key is to NOT give in. If you give in and give your dog attention (yell at him for example) you will have increased the duration and strength of the barking behaviour. As hard as it can be to put up with the ramped up barking you must hold out for quiet – once you get past the extinction burst, you are well on the way to success.

### **Strategies that are Not Recommended**

The following strategies are NOT recommended because:

- They are ineffective
- They do not address the real problem (barking is a symptom)
- They may be harmful to your relationship with your dog
- They may be harmful to the dog

Avoid

- Debarking procedures
- Spray bottles / penny cans etc.
- Citronella collars
- E collars
- Ultrasonic bark collars

### **Last words**

Always remember that your dog does not have words. Barking is one of the ways he has to communicate with you. Remember too that behaviour continues because it works. As annoying as barking can be, it is up to us to try to understand the reasons for it and use humane and safe methods to address barking with the goal of ultimately making persisting / annoying barking unnecessary. If your dog has a long established history of excessive barking you are not going to solve this overnight – it will be a process of working slowly to undo the reinforcement that has perpetuated the barking, to address the needs that barking meets and to develop new behaviours and habits that take the place of barking.