

Barking

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Dogs bark for a variety of reasons and your reaction to the barking can either encourage or discourage this behavior. What is your dog trying to tell you with his bark? Read below to learn about the most prominent reasons why dogs bark and what positive reinforcement measures you can take to manage these behaviors.

Watchdog Barking

Watchdog Barking serves the dual purpose of alerting pack members that there is an intruder and warning the intruder that they have been noticed.

You can best manage this kind of barking by teaching your dog a alternative response – such as fetching a certain toy or doing a down-stay on a mat (which ceases barking in many dogs) for tasty food rewards. Practice out of doorbell or “intruder” contexts first and then incorporate the game or command into real-life situations. The dog will need some coaching and prompting the first few times in the real-life situation so prepare to budget some time for that. Even better, set it up with a cohort to play “visitor,” so you can focus on the dog rather than actually having to attend to the person at the door.

Request Barking

Request Barking is the dog’s way of communicating to the owner that he would like something **NOW**. Typical requests are “open the door NOW,” “pay attention to me NOW,” “let me out of here NOW,” “I wanna see that dog NOW” etc.

When they want something, dogs will experiment with various behaviors to see if any of them work. They quickly figure out that barking works with their owners. If you don’t like barking, don’t reward it with attention in the form of door-opening services, releasing from crates, etc. Even verbally acknowledging your dog’s barking with a “Stop!” or “No.” actually functions to reinforce the unwanted behavior because you’re paying attention to them.

Rather than the dog telling you when to take him out, take him out at regular intervals, making sure none of them are preceded by barking. Don’t let a barking dog out of a crate until he’s quiet. Ignore dogs who bark at you. Keep in mind that if you have been rewarding it for a while, the barking will get worse before it goes into extinction. You’re changing the rules and the dog will be frustrated at first. Whatever you do, don’t crack and reward the WORSE version of the barking! Above all, start noticing the dog when he’s quiet. Teach him that there are payoffs for lying quietly, chewing on a chew-toy and refraining from barking.

Barking When Alone

This is a common form of request barking: the dog is requesting that you come back. There is also often some anxiety involved. When you get a new dog or puppy, set a good precedent right away - don’t smother him with your constant presence and attention. Come and go a lot and never go to him when he’s vocalizing. Wait until he’s quiet for at least 30 seconds so you don’t risk rewarding the noise making. If your dog already has a habit, you must start a multi-pronged approach:

- 1) When you’re at home, don’t let him shadow you around: put him in various rooms away from you to practice “semi-absences” and ignore any barking. If you feel inclined to reprimand your dog for barking, remember that he’s barking to get you back. With some dogs, a reprimand is a better response than nothing at all so you may actually be rewarding his barking.
- 2) Practice lots of brief absences, every day. Go out and come back in after 2 or 3 seconds over and over to get the dog desensitized to your departures. Do it in a matter of fact way, more or less ignoring the dog whatever he does. Then do outings of 10 seconds, 30, a minute, 10 minutes etc. Mix it up. Dogs who are anxious need to learn that your departure



doesn't usually mean a traumatically long period of isolation. Keep all your departures and arrival greetings low key. Never enter when the dog is barking. Wait for a lull of at least 30 seconds.

3) Dogs are a highly social species. They don't cope well with prolonged isolation. Consider a second dog, daycare or dog-walker at lunchtime if you work all day.

4) Increase physical and mental stimulation. In a natural environment, a lot of your dog's energy would be spent acquiring his food. He would have to find prey, run it down, hang onto it, etc. He'd have to attempt several finds and run-downs before he was successful. That's a lot of work and energy spent!

Tire him out more before long absences. Walks don't cut it as exercise for dogs. Most dogs like getting out and checking out the environment but it's not exercise. Exercise means exertion. Start working your dog out with high-intensity games like ball-fetch, Frisbee, tug-of-war, hide & seek, free-play with other dogs etc.

Make him work to acquire his food. Hide it around the house, scatter it in the grass in the backyard, make him extract it from the hollow inside of a bone or Kong toy (which you also hide), make him earn it piece by piece for obedience exercises or tricks, make him solve problems. Your imagination is the limit. Make your absences predict that his meal is hidden around the house so that he has to get busy when you leave if he wants to eat. Dogs are programmed to work for their food. It's no wonder there are so many problems related to understimulation.

5) Get him more focused on toys. When you play with him, incorporate toys. Hold chewies for him. Teach him to find a toy that you've hidden in the room and then celebrate his find with tug of war or fetch. Teach him his toys by name. Ask him to bring you one when you come home. Don't greet him until he's brought it. Then have a vigorous game of fetch. Leave him stuffed chew toys during absences: fill hollow bones or Kongs with cheese, peanut butter, cookies or combos. If your dog is anxious to the point of panic attacks, he has separation anxiety and need formal desensitization and/or medication.

Spooky Barking

Spooky Barking occurs when the dog is uncomfortable about something in the environment and barks to say "I'm dangerous! Don't come any closer!"

In this case, it is important to get at the underlying undersocialization. Socialize puppies extensively to as wide of a variety of people and dogs as possible. You cannot overdo it. Expose them to plenty of places, experiences, sights & sounds and make it all fun with praise, games & treats. Find and attend a good puppy class. If you missed the boat socializing your puppy, you'll have to do remedial work with your adolescent or adult. Whatever it is that your dog is spooky about must now become associated with lunch. This is how undersocialized dogs work for their food. If he doesn't like strangers, meals need to be fed bit by bit around strangers until he improves. It takes a while to resocialize adults so stick with it.

Boredom Barking

Boredom Barking can result when the dog's daily needs for exercise and social stimulation are not met. The dog has gone essentially mad from boredom. Dogs are not space-intensive, they are time-intensive. There is no quick fix here: using some of the methods discussed above, you must meet your dog's basic needs for stimulation, exercise and companionship.

If you have a pet behavior question or would like some training assistance,
San Diego Humane Society is here to help!
Visit our website at www.sdhumane.org to view our behavior and training options,
or call our **Behavior Helpline at 619-299-7012 ext. 2244** to speak with a trainer.