



How to Curb Excessive Barking

Barking is one way that your dog communicates. But there are times when you want to control the behavior. Here's how to do it.

There are times when you're grateful that your dog barks — when a scary stranger approaches on the street, perhaps, or if someone is lurking in your backyard — but at other times you wish you had a mute button. For example, my dog is quick to bark when someone comes to the door, but slow to stop barking even if she recognizes the visitor. Other owners complain that their dogs bark (and keep barking!) at the mailman or UPS guy, even though their presence is a daily occurrence. Good news: If you're tired of your pet sounding off incessantly, there *is* a way to keep excessive barking to a minimum.

Why Do Dogs Bark?

Barking is one of the ways a dog communicates. According to Julia Albright, DVM, a resident in the Animal Behavior Clinic at Cornell University's College of Veterinary Medicine, "Barking is a normal, innate and firmly 'hard-wired' behavior in certain breeds and individuals." Some dogs are bigger barkers than others, although pretty much all dogs will bark in the right circumstances.

"Dogs vocalizing are asking for information: whether you're a threat, whether you're going to interact with them, or to tell you they're stressed," explains animal behaviorist Karen Overall, VMD, PhD.

Some owners complain that their dogs won't stop barking at the mailman — even though his presence is a daily occurrence.

"In protective situations, they're trying to see if people are threats: Hello, this is my turf, who are you, why are you approaching?"

In some cases, however, barking may be considered abnormal. "Many dogs that get extremely worked up with people at the door have anxiety problems," notes Dr. Overall, who is board-certified by the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists. "Aborting those problems is the key here. Telling them to shut up won't fix them. If they are afraid of strangers, or think they need to protect the house, dealing with those things will help abort the barking."

To Bark or Not to Bark

It is possible to train a dog to bark only on cue. "For most of us, teaching the dog control at the door means allowing the dog to bark once or twice and then settle down," says Dr. Albright. "But believe it or not, some people do not care for barking at all and teach the dog not to bark." Some people train a dog to bark on command or cue instead. Military and police dogs are trained to bark only at humans, not animals, and service dogs are taught to ignore other dogs to focus on the task at hand.

But then come the questions: Should your dog be the strong, silent type? Or is it better to have a bit of barking? Security companies will sell you burglar alarms for your home, but many will admit that a barking dog is as good as or better a deterrent than security signs or decals. A barking dog will let you know when someone is approaching, be it friend or foe. Many owners would agree that some degree of barking is desirable. However, barking can lead to more than noise pollution.

When Barking Leads to More

In some instances, barking can become a

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self-reinforcing behavior — that is, the dog gets a “reward” from barking, even if it’s not in the form of a treat from his owner. For example, consider the mailman who approaches every day. The dog hears the mailman come; he barks; the mailman leaves. In the dog’s mind, his barking drove the intruder away. “The barking is being reinforced by the coincidental departure,” says Dr. Albright, “so barking may reinforce territoriality, as the visitor then leaves.” This means a dog begins to consider barking to be a successful means of driving away intruders and will continue the behavior.

When a Bark Leads to a Bite

Excessive barking can be more than just a nuisance, says Dr. Albright; in some cases, it can lead to dangerous consequences. “In some dogs, barking is one of the initiating steps in an aggressive behavior sequence, so halting the dog at this stage may be recommended,” she explains. But be careful: “If the dog is barking concurrently with more aggressive behaviors, such as growling or snarling, punishing barking may create a silent attacker.” She suggests removing a dog with territorial or fear-related aggression from the situation and then exposing the dog to the visitor in very controlled desensitization or classical conditioning situations. Because this can take quite a bit of time and training, it’s recommended that you consult a qualified veterinary behaviorist rather than undertaking this on your own.

Commons Methods That Fail

First, let’s describe what experts find doesn’t work:

Yelling — Owners are often frustrated that, despite yelling at their dogs to stop the racket, their dogs continue to bark. There’s a simple reason why that doesn’t work: The dog is likely to think that the owner is barking along with him. “Yelling at the dog is usually a self-defeating exercise, since the dog just thinks you

are encouraging him,” says Dr. Albright.

Ignoring — Sometimes ignoring barking leaves the behavior to die out; however, in many cases — especially those that are self-reinforcing — this won’t work.

Removing — Yanking the dog away from the situation might seem to be an obvious fix, but it can backfire for dogs with anxious temperaments. “Sometimes people inadvertently teach a dog to be more anxious by shutting them away from a stimulus,” says Dr. Overall. “For example, if the dog won’t stop barking at a strange guest and you shut her in another room, when the dog is let out she will be even more stressed, because she couldn’t evaluate the situation.”

For the most part, the best way to teach a dog to stop barking is to teach him to bark (and thus also to stop) on cue.

What does Work

Elicit barking — First, realize that it’s normal for your dog to bark when someone knocks on the door. According to Dr. Overall, you don’t want to try to extinguish a normal response. However, you can harness that response to teach a dog how to be quiet. “Get the dog to bark, perhaps by making a knocking sound, and when he starts to bark, say ‘Quiet’ and praise him when he does stop barking,” says Dr. Albright. Dr. Overall recommends also asking the dog to sit.

Reinforce the quiet — Dr. Overall recommends rewarding the dog with a high-value treat when he stops barking at your command, and continuing to do this consistently. What if he doesn’t stop barking at all? According to Dr. Albright, some options include using a quick blast from an air horn or giving a can filled with coins a quick shake to startle the dog into temporary quiet. It’s essential to immediately give the “Quiet” command and reward so that the dog will associate the cessation of his barking with the treat. Other options: “I use a citronella bark collar, but make sure the dog is not

overly anxious about the noise or spray,” says Dr. Albright. Some people, she adds, use a head halter to gently pull the dog’s head up and mouth shut during the bark, immediately releasing when the dog quiets.

One crucial element is the personal touch: Don’t assume that simply shouting “Quiet!” from across the room will have the desired effect. “You have to actually get up, go to the door and ask the dog to sit; don’t just yell from the couch,” says Dr. Overall. “All of my clients who complain about barking at the door and reward them for stopping are amazed at how much less reactive the dog becomes across the board.”

Find a way to avoid barking when you’re not there — Especially for dogs who find barking self-reinforcing, it’s important to continue teaching the dog to limit barking when you’re not there to interrupt and treat for quiet. If possible, put the dog in a part of the house where he can’t see or hear the approach of visitors, or block his view of the street with curtains or contact paper. Don’t leave him in the back yard all day where he can spot passersby. Put up a sign on the front door saying, “Dog training in progress: Please do not ring bell.” Ask your UPS or FedEx drivers to drop packages somewhere other than the front step. If you really want to cover all bases, put up a sign requesting that visitors call from a cell phone upon arrival rather than knocking or ringing the bell.

Citronella Collars: Useful

Dr. Albright recommends using a bark collar. “Bark collars are good products because they correct the dog immediately and every time he barks, regardless of your presence,” she says. “These are the most effective ways to prevent a dog from barking in the owner’s absence.” She doesn’t advocate shock collars, but suggests the use of citronella collars as effective, humane alternatives. For the occasional dog who might bark right through the spray, try a combination of the methods listed here. ❖ By C.C. Holland