

BARKING

Why do dogs bark?

Barking is one of the most common complaints of dog owners and their neighbors! But barking is natural. It can serve as a territorial warning signal to other dogs and pack members. Dogs may vocalize when separated from their pack or family members. Barking also occurs during times of indecision, anxiety, or frustration. Medical problems can also contribute to vocalization, especially in the older dog.

How can barking problems be prevented?

Socialization and **habituation** — get puppies used to as many new people, animals, situations and noises as possible. This will minimize the amount or intensity of alarm barking. Barking should only be allowed to alert owners and then be controlled and stopped before the dog becomes agitated and out of control. Owner control, training and leadership are essential (see our handout on ‘Puppy training - taking charge’).

How can I stop my dog barking when I leave?

Effective crate training techniques when your dog is first obtained, should decrease the dog’s anxiety when it is left alone in its crate (see our handout on ‘House safety and crate training’). Your dog should gradually be taught to spend longer periods of time away from you. Obtaining two dogs may provide company for each other and may reduce distress vocalization and departure anxiety. If your dog has been barking when you leave for some time, he may be suffering from separation anxiety and you should consult your veterinarian for treatment options.



My dog constantly barks. What does she want?

Attention getting barking can be problematic and is often reinforced by owners giving in to their dog’s demands. Allowing a barking dog indoors, or feeding, patting, praising, playing with, giving a toy, or even just going to a barking dog to try and quiet it down, are just a few examples of how an owner may unknowingly reinforce barking. Never reward barking with any type of attention, even occasionally.

How can I train my dog to be ‘quiet’?

Training the dog to a ‘quiet’ command is an invaluable aid for controlling undesirable barking. You must find an effective means of quieting the dog, which should be preceded with a command such as ‘quiet’. Just loudly telling your pet to ‘be quiet’, will probably not be understood, especially if silence does not follow the verbal command. In fact, yelling may just add to the noise and anxiety, thereby encouraging your dog to bark more.

One of the most practical techniques for teaching a dog to cease barking on command, is to first, be able to command the dog to begin barking on cue. Use a stimulus that will cause the dog to bark and pair it with a 'bark' command. Numerous repetitions allow the dog to associate the word 'bark' or 'speak' with the action. Dogs that bark on command can then be taught to turn off the barking by removing the cue or stimulus, and giving a 'hush' or 'quiet' command just before the barking subsides. As soon as your dog is quiet, give a favored treat or reward.

It can be difficult or impractical to teach a dog to be 'quiet' on command if the barking cannot be predicted or 'turned on' or if it is too intense.

Another method to teach a "quiet" command is to wait until your dog is barking, say to a doorbell and while he is barking place a very tasty food treat by his nose. Most dogs will stop barking to sniff the treat. At the same time you must say the word you will use for quiet, such as 'silent', 'hush' etc. When the dog is quiet (as they will be because dogs cannot sniff and bark at the same time) you can praise him, say 'good, quiet' and give the treat. Again, as with all new tasks, numerous repetitions are necessary for lasting learning.



Alternately, distraction or remote punishment devices (see below) can be used to disrupt the barking. One of the most effective means of interrupting barking and ensuring quiet is a remote leash and head halter. A pull on the leash disrupts the dog and closes the mouth, which should also coincide with a verbal command such as 'quiet' or 'hush'. Quiet behavior can then be reinforced first by releasing and then giving a reinforcer such as praise or food if the dog remains quiet. Soon the dog should associate the closed mouth and the word prompt with the absence of noise and begin to stop barking when given the verbal prompt alone.

What are my chances of correcting my dog's barking problem?

Chances are good for most barking problems. But the household situation in which the dog resides may make it extremely difficult to correct completely. Even a small amount of barking could disturb a sleeping baby, or upset neighbors, (particularly in apartments or townhouses). When trying to resolve barking problems, the motivation for the barking behavior is an important component. Some stimuli are so strong that it will be difficult to stop the barking behavior. You need sufficient time to implement the correction training.

What can I do to correct my dog's barking problem?

The treatment program must be based on the type of problem, your household, the immediacy of the situation, and the type and level of control that you require. A good behavioral history is important to determine cause, motivation and potential reinforcing stimuli for the barking behavior. Treatment plans need to consider the following:

1. Ensure that your dog is not being rewarded inadvertently. Some owners in an attempt to calm their dog down will actually encourage the barking by giving attention, play, food or affection.
2. Insure that your response is not aggravating the problem. For example yelling at a dog that is barking due to anxiety or as a territorial response is only likely to increase the dog's barking and anxiety.

3. Sometimes the home environment can be modified so that the dog is kept away from the stimuli (sounds and sights) that cause barking. Exposure might be minimized by confining the dog to a crate, or room away from doors and windows or covering windows so that the dog cannot look outside. Additionally, privacy fencing may be helpful for dogs outdoors. Dogs that bark when left alone outdoors may have to be kept indoors except when the owner is available to supervise. Trigger sounds such as doorbells or telephones that might have become conditioned stimuli for barking should be altered to change their sound.
4. Until effective control and leadership is established, training programs are unlikely to be successful. Increasing interactive play periods and exercise, crate and confinement training, halter training and obedience classes may need to be implemented before bark control training can begin.
5. Once you have sufficient control and the dog responds to obedience commands and handling, it should be possible to train your dog to cease barking on command. Training the dog to cease barking on command can be accomplished with lure reward techniques, distraction techniques, or halter and leash training. Regardless of the technique, rewards should be given as soon as the barking stops, so that the dog learns that quiet behavior earns rewards. It is most important to associate SILENCE with the command used. Over time the behavior should be shaped so that the dog is required to stay quiet for progressively longer times, before a reward is given.
6. Once the owner has sufficient control with training and the quiet command, it may then be possible to begin a retraining program in the presence of the stimuli (people, other dogs) that lead to barking. Training with a head halter and leash often provides a tool for implementing the techniques safely and effectively especially indoors or when the owner is nearby. The stimulus should first be presented to the dog from a distance (e.g. children riding bicycles on the street while the dog stands on its porch), and the dog given a quiet or sit-stay command. Although the halter and leash is generally all that is required to control the dog and achieve the appropriate response, the dog could also be disrupted using a device such as an ultrasonic trainer or shake can. Training sessions are then repeated with progressively more intense stimuli. This type of training can be effective, but progress can be slow and time consuming.
7. Pets that are barking for other reasons (fear, separation anxiety, or compulsive disorders) will require treatment for the underlying problem.



Should I punish my dog when she keeps barking?

Punishment is seldom effective in the control and correction of barking problems. Excessive levels of punishment can increase anxiety and further aggravate many forms of barking, while mild punishment merely rewards the behavior by providing attention.

What anti-barking devices are there and are they effective?

Owner-Activated Products: These products are most useful for getting the pet's attention (disruption) during quiet command training. Ultrasonic devices (Pet Agree™, Easy Trainer™), audible devices (Barker Breaker™, rape alarms), water sprayers, or a shake can (an empty peanut or soda can with a few coins or pebbles sealed inside) are often successful. Without concurrent retraining techniques and an owner with good control, many dogs will soon begin to ignore the devices. However, if the device is used to interrupt the barking and the quiet behavior is then reinforced, the pet may become less anxious and less likely to bark in the presence of the stimulus, or at the very least will quiet much faster on command.

Bark-Activated Products: When barking occurs in the owner's absence, bark activated products (in conjunction with environmental modification and retraining) are often the most practical means of deterring inappropriate barking. Bark-activated products may also be a better choice than owner-activated devices, since they ensure immediate and accurate timing. Off-collar devices are useful for training the dog to cease barking in selected areas, such as near doorways or windows, (or for dogs that bark in their crate or pen). The Super Barker Breaker emits an audible alarm while the Yapper Zapper™ sprays a stream of water each time the dog barks.



Bark-activated collars are useful when barking does not occur in a predictable location. Audible and ultrasonic training collars are occasionally effective but they are neither sufficiently unpleasant nor consistent enough to be a reliable deterrent. The Aboistop™ or Gentle Spray™ collar emits a spray of citronella each time the dog barks and is sufficiently unpleasant to deter most dogs. Although these may be effective in the owner's absence, they have their most lasting effects when the owner is present to supervise and retrain. As soon as the barking ceases, the owner should direct the dog into an enjoyable pastime (e.g. play, tummy rub, favorite treat) as long as the dog remains quiet. . Soon the dog may associate the stimulus (people coming to the door, people coming to the yard) with something positive.

Most importantly, bark collars only work when they are on the dog. Most dogs will learn to distinguish when the collar is on and when it is off. When they are not wearing the collar, most dogs will bark.

Is debarking surgery effective?

Surgical debarking is a drastic and often permanent method of eliminating barking. Varying degrees of vocalization may return as the surgical site heals and scars. Devocalization may need to be considered when owners are confronted with the option of immediately resolving a barking problem or having to give up their pet. However, all attempts at behavior modification should be continued to try and address the underlying motivation for barking and perhaps effect a permanent solution.