

Dogs and Barking: What To Do About It



Dogs bark for a variety of reasons, and it is a form of normal communication. Here are some of the many reasons dogs bark.

Alert barking springs from territoriality, barrier frustration, or a combination of the two.

Attention-seeking barking is your dog's way of communicating that he would like something (attention, play, or food) right now.

Fear/alarm barking occurs when your dog is uncomfortable about something in the environment and barks to say "I'm scared! Don't come any closer!"

Loneliness/boredom barking happens when your dog's daily needs for companionship, exercise, and social stimulation are not met. In a sense, the dog has become sad due to boredom.

Anxious barking can be a symptom of separation-related problems.

Two strategies to deal with barking: Managing and Training

Managing is preventing the situation that triggers barking in the first place, or preventing your dog's access to the trigger. At the same time, increase your dog's activity level and/or social interactions. Tired dogs that have had plenty of companionship throughout the day are far less likely to bark.

Training is teaching your dog a mutually exclusive behavior; for example, to be quiet on command.

Now that we understand our two strategies, we can apply them to each of the different kinds of barking.

Dealing with alert barking

Manage: If your dog barks at doorbells or people passing by outside, limit your dog's access to parts of the house that face sidewalks or streets or to the area near the front door. If your dog barks at other dogs while on leash, avoid areas with many dogs and be sure to reward good walking manners. You can often reduce the severity of your dog's alert barking by boosting the amount of exercise and stimulation he gets. Invite people and dogs over to socialize and expose him to a wider range of sights and sounds. Also, if your dog barks at the smallest sounds and changes in the environment, try taking him outside more.

Train: For barking at doorbells, the standby training technique is to teach your dog a mutually exclusive behavior, such as fetching a certain toy or doing a Down-Stay on a mat for tasty food rewards. Another technique—which requires more effort but has great results—is to teach your dog to be quiet on cue. To train your dog not to bark at other dogs while on leash, consult a trainer for a behavior modification program.

Dealing with attention-seeking barking

Manage: More exercise, more playtime, and plenty of social interactions can reduce attention-seeking barking. The best cure however, is not to teach your dog that barking gets him what he wants.

Train: If you don't like barking, stop rewarding it with attention, door-opening and ball-throwing services, releasing from crates, etc. Period. No buts. Rather than your dog telling you when to take him out, take him out at regular intervals and make sure none are preceded by barking. Don't let a barking dog out of a crate until he's quiet. Ignore dogs that bark at you. Keep in mind that if you have been rewarding barking for a while, it will get worse before it gets better. Because you're changing the rules, your dog will be frustrated at first. Above all, start paying attention to your dog when he's quiet. Teach him that there are payoffs for lying quietly, chewing on a chew toy, and refraining from barking.

Dealing with fear/alarm barking

Barking at people or objects can mean several things. Your dog may be uncomfortable with strangers or with a subset of people (people wearing hats, for example). He might be suspicious of buses or lawn mowers. If your dog is barking at people simply because he's excited to meet them, give him a toy to carry around or train him to be quiet on cue.

Manage: Avoid the barking trigger(s). Choose quiet streets or open spaces for your dog's exercise. Set up your dog's confinement/safe area in a part of the house away from visitors.

Train: To reduce fear/alarm barking, you must teach your dog to associate the alarming thing with food. Bring yummy treats on walks and keep enough distance from the scary thing that your dog will eat the treats while passing it, and then work to gradually reduce the distance. If your dog doesn't like strangers, meals should be fed bit by bit around strangers until he improves. It takes a while to re-socialize an adult dog, so stick with it.

Dealing with loneliness/boredom barking

Manage: There is no quick fix or training solution here. You must meet your dog's basic needs for stimulation, exercise, and companionship. If you have an outside dog, make him an inside dog. If you can, arrange for your dog to be with you or a friend during the day. Alternatively, hire a dog walker or enroll your dog in a doggie daycare.

Dealing with anxious barking

If your dog barks and whines when left alone and you have established the reason is anxiety, he may be suffering from separation anxiety and will need formal desensitization and/or medication. Contact a trainer or behaviorist.

What about bark-control collars?

Anti-bark collars are remote punishment tools that deliver an unpleasant stimulus when your dog barks, such as a loud noise, an ultrasonic noise, a spray of citronella mist, or an electric shock. Because barking is a natural means of expression for dogs and not something to punish them for, we recommend using training and management techniques to reduce excessive barking instead. That's also preferable because many dogs simply learn not to bark when wearing the anti-bark collar, but go right back to barking once it comes off.

Note: *Never use shock collars or any other type of collar that inflicts pain on your dog. It is inhumane, can permanently disfigure or harm your dog, and may lead to aggression.*

