



BARKING & VOCALIZATION

Barking is a common issue that many owner's face ... and yes, it is a human problem, not a dog problem. Barking can manifest in many ways and only when the underlying triggers and circumstances are addressed, can we really begin to change the behavior itself. To maximize learning, make sure to pinpoint exactly what triggers or situations are the cause of barking.

ATTENTION BARKING

Dogs will bark for attention to get a response out of a human or other dog - and often it works! The dog barks and the owner speeds up feeding it. The dog barks during play and another engages or tells it off. The dog wants to go outside and scratches or barks at the door. Behavior repeats itself as long as the dog gets something out of the interaction.

Whether the owner throws the ball for a barking dog or scolds them for barking - the behavior receives feedback nevertheless. In order to stop attention barking, ensure the exact opposite happens - the game ends, the owner walks away, or the dog is subtly put into a time out. Although removal is a good consequence for most barking, a more appropriate response is to redirect the dog in situations to get attention for being quiet before barking occurs.

BARKING AT THE DOORBELL / VISITORS

Dogs do not come prewired to barking at the doorbell, knocking, or visitors at the door. It is a behavior that naturally occurs as the dog associates the sound with the presence of people and the door opening.

In order to redirect barking at the doorbell, work on a "quiet" command. Most owners want their dog to alert to a presence at the door, but would like the behavior to stop when told to do so. Make sure to teach and reward the dog for being quiet and only letting visitors in once the dog has settled. Building on engagement, focus, and using the "wait" command will further help de-escalate the situation.

AT THE WINDOW

Many dogs become agitated or over-stimulated when people pass by their house or window. This behavior is a naturally offensive manifestation of territorial behavior. The worst part - the dog barks, and the people keep moving and disappear. The humans may just be out on a stroll in the neighborhood, but the dog has been reinforced for it's efforts.

Try using management to help minimize unwanted behavior, especially when you are not home. Set up a baby gate to block access to windows, use blinds or covers to minimize stimulation. When the windows are not covered, practice impulse control, "place", "leave it" and reinforce quiet as people pass. You may have to start further away from the trigger area and slowly work your way closer. Once the dog has some coping skills, try feeding a stuffed food dispensing toy during high traffic times while removing any barriers.

IN THE YARD

Similarly to the dog at the window, dogs who bark in the yard will do so to protect their surroundings. This is part frustration because of a barrier (fence, leash, shock system) and partially because they are over stimulated. Although boredom or a natural inclination to alert to a new presence in the environment is common, it can be a pain.

SOUND SENSITIVITY

Some dogs are more sensitive to their surroundings than others. This is especially relevant to different sounds and noises in the environment. Some dogs will bark at novel noises such as a tree branch banging against the house, whereas others will sound out in the middle of the night for no apparent reason. The reality is, dogs hear up to 4 times better than the average human, and at a 40-60,000 Hz range (while humans hear between 20-20,000 Hz). It is no wonder dogs may hear sounds within the environment that we are oblivious to or unaware of.

The key to sound sensitivity is to do slow, low grade exposure while reinforcing the dog to help form positive associations. Try to pin point exactly what triggers your dog in order to help them desensitize (acclimate) to the sounds. Try using the "what's that" exercise to further build confidence and reassure them that everything's ok.

*Some dogs become more vocal at night with age, especially at sunset and at night. This may be due to loss of eyesight, lack of orientation, or the dog version of "sundowner syndrome" known as "Canine Cognitive Dysfunction". Speak to your vet about supplementing with **Melatonin** or using dopamine enhancers such as **Anipril**. Medications alongside a stable night routine, increased mental activity, physical exercise, using night lights around then house can help ease the dog. Unfortunately there is no exact "fix" for this condition.*

FRUSTRATION

Some dogs will bark out of frustration because they feel conflicted or agitated. A dog may bark while learning a new exercise because they are unsure what is asked of them. Some dogs bark because they cant get to a toy under the couch. Others bark because they want to get out of their crate and join the activity,

To help deal with frustration, stop any training if the dog has a meltdown. Try walking away if the dog wants the toy, ensuring to reinforce good behavior once they have quieted. Resume activities once the dog has gotten over the hump - frustration is a natural part of the learning process and it is important for the dog to learn how to cope with this emotion.

OFFENSIVE TO DOGS AND STRANGERS

Dogs will bark at stranger, people passing by, or other dogs for various reasons. Some dogs are over excited and the increase in stimulation (especially in proximity) will cause the dog to bark. Others use this tactic as an offensive maneuver to keep their distance because they feel threatened or alarmed. Either way - the dog barks because of an inability to cope with the situation. The barking is not the root of the problem - the inability to adapt to the circumstance is.

Although reactive behavior that is aggressive in nature requires behavior modification in order to alter the reaction to triggers, over stimulation and excitement can be remedied with engagement skills, impulse control exercises, and removal.

A dog that is over stimulated by an approaching dog or person is not tuned in to their owner. Practice focus, engagement skills, and the “pick me” game at a distance. As the dog responds appropriately, increase the distance towards the trigger. The dog will learn through time and practice, that the owner is more valuable than the approaching subject. Most importantly - teach your dog that a calm, collected, and polite approach gives them access to greetings. An automatic sit really helps in social settings. Consider turning around and removing the dog if they focus is not on you or when excitement escalates.

MENTAL STIMULATION

Often vocalization increases because the dog is lacking in mental stimulation. They may begin to react to new triggers, wait for stimuli in their yard, and hope for something to react to. This behavior can become a game and outlet for excess energy. Ensure your dog is receiving enough physical exercise to tire them out. Provide food dispensing toys to keep their brains engaged in appropriate activities. Are you keeping your dog busy and giving them a job? Most breeds (and crosses) were developed for a purpose - something that is so often overlooked in dog ownership. Go practice retrieves and obedience with that bird dog, try nosework and hiding items for your hound, how about tricks training for your terrier, and try integrating their physical and mental needs into your daily routine.

USING BARK COLLARS

A variety of sound triggered collars will correct the dog upon vocalization. They may emit a spray, shock the dog, vibrate, or sound a high pitched noise. Either way, these tools are designed to suppress barking by providing a negative consequence to the behavior. Although this tool may work for some, the greatest issue is that the underlying problem is not addressed. The owner's habits will not change, and the dog is given no alternative for unwanted behavior. Worst of all, some dogs may begin to associate the correction with the trigger causing either suppression or further escalation of the behavior.

The dog in the yard may bite someone because the correction is not associated with barking, but with passing strangers. The dog who has separation anxiety may now soil the crate because it is further distressed. The dog in the crate may refuse to return to the enclosure for fear of correction. Bark collars should be used selectively, sparingly, and only as a last resort.

Debarking by surgical procedure (cutting the vocal cords) is an inhumane practice and should not be performed. In reality - consider careful management, increased physical and mental exercise, or following the suggestions above. If neighbors complain consider: when to give your dog access to the yard, limit interactions with visitors to calm behavior, and actively work on manners. Besides, the dry heaving of a debarked dog will drive you even more nuts.