Your complete guide to natural dog care and training
Whole Dog Journal™

Why Dogs Bark and How to Stop Them

The best way to quiet a barking dog depends on the reason the dog is barking.

By Pat Miller, CBCC-KA, CPDT-KA

As I write this I can hear my Kelpie, Kai, in the backyard barking at . . . something. Kai barks a lot – at squirrels, cats, birds, horses – anything that moves! I can empathize with dog owners who live in closer quarters, where a barking dog can be the catalyst for neighbor feuds, animal control citations, and civil lawsuits. And I thank my lucky stars that our nearest neighbors are a half-mile away and not likely to complain about occasional bouts of canine cacophony.

Barking is a natural, normal canine behavior. If you have a dog, you need to understand and accept that sometimes dogs bark!

That said, some dogs bark a whole lot more than others. (See “Barky Breeds,” below.) Dogs also bark for a variety of reasons. How you work to manage and modify your dog’s barking will depend, at least in part, on what motivates him to bark.

Step one of any good barking-modification program is minimizing your dog’s need and opportunity to bark. Exercise, an important element of many good behavior modification programs, is useful here as well. A tired dog has less energy, hence less need to bark, and a well-exercised dog tends to be emotionally healthier as well.

Meanwhile, good management minimizes barking opportunity. Close drapes or put up baby gates to deter out-the-window barkers. Use white noise or calming music to muffle sounds that set off your dog. The more your dog practices his unwanted barking behavior, the more often is it reinforced (barking makes the mail carrier go away!), and the harder it is to modify.

Finally, in order to successfully modify barking behavior, you have to understand why your dog is barking.

Reasons Dogs Bark and How to Modify It

Again, how you manage and modify your dog's barking will depend on what's motivating him to bark. You might successfully ignore a demand barker's utterances and reinforce him for quiet, but ignoring a dog who is barking from anxiety can exacerbate the behavior.

Here are the most common reasons that dogs bark, and how to resolve them:

Alarm Barking

A dog who alarm-barks may save his family from a fire, inform you that Timmy's in the well, scare off a rapist – or just go bonkers every time someone walks past your house on the sidewalk. This dog is doing his job: letting you know there's something to be seriously concerned about. Alarm barkers can save lives, but sometimes their judgment about what constitutes an alarm-appropriate situation can be a little faulty.

To manage alarm-barking, reduce your dog's exposure to stimuli that cause his arousal. Perhaps you can baby-gate him out of the front room, move the sofa away from the windows so he can't jump up and see out, close drapes, or tape poster board over the windows. Outside, install a privacy fence, attach a solid barrier of some kind to your see-through chain-link fencing, or put up an interior fence to block his access to the more stimulating parts of the yard.

You can also use counter-conditioning and desensitization to modify barking at things he really doesn't need to be alarmed about. Sit with him at the window. As soon as someone comes into view, let him look, feed him a high-value tidbit, let him look again, feed again, until the passerby is out of sight. When you're not there to feed, prevent access to windows that look out on passersby.

Given that alarm barking will inevitably occur, it's also useful to teach your dog a positive interrupt – a cue, friendlier than "Shut up!" that you can use to stop him in mid-bark. (See "The Positive Interrupt," below.) However, your dog might be barking because something really is wrong. Before you use that positive interrupt, take a moment to see what your dog is barking at. Perhaps your house really is on fire.

Alert Barking

This is your dog's less-aroused approach to letting you know that there's something of interest afoot; a squirrel on the back fence, or Dad's car pulling in the driveway at the end of the work day. It can be managed and modified in the same manner as alarm-barking, including use of the positive interrupt, but is usually easier to work with because the emotional level is much lower.

Anxiety Barking

Barking due to anxiety can be manifested as a number of behaviors, including hysterical barking and sometimes howling. This is a complex and challenging behavior to both modify and manage, because true anxiety is a real panic attack – the dog truly cannot control his behavior.

One of the most common presentations of this condition is separation anxiety – a very difficult behavior to live and work with. (See "Relieving a Dog's Separation Anxiety," WDJ July 2008.) Real anxiety usually requires the intervention of a good positive behavior consultant, and often, behavior modification drugs. If your dog's barking is due to anxiety, consult with a professional behavior counselor, and manage his environment to minimize his exposure to anxiety-producing conditions while you help him learn how to cope. (Note: The use of shock collars, not something I would recommend in any case, is a horrifically poor choice here, almost guaranteed to increase your dog's stress and anxiety.)

Boredom Barking

Dogs are social creatures, and the backyard dog is lonely and bored. Boredom barking is often continuous, with a monotonous quality: "Ho hum, nothing else to do, I may as well just bark." This kind of barking is most annoying to neighbors, and likely to elicit a visit from a local animal control officer.

The answer here is obvious and relatively easy. Bring the dog inside. Many outdoor barkers are perfectly content to lie quietly around the house all day, waiting for you to come home, and sleep peacefully beside your bed at night. If your dog isn't house-safe, use crates, exercise pens, dog walkers, lots of exercise, and even doggie daycare to keep him out of trouble until he earns house privileges. You can also enrich his environment by giving him interactive toys such as food-stuffed Kong toys to keep his brain engaged and his mouth busy. See "Must-Have Chew Toys," (WDJ 2016) for some of *Whole Dog Journal*'s favorites.

Demand Barking

This behavior is more likely to annoy you than your neighbors, but it's annoying nonetheless. A demand barker learns that he can get what he wants (usually attention or treats) by making noise. It often starts as a gentle, adorable little grumble, and can quickly turn into insistent, loud barks – your dog's way of saying, "I want it, now!" You can preempt the development of demand barking by remembering to randomly give your dog attention and treats for being quiet, before he starts barking.

Demand barking, once it starts to occur, is easiest to extinguish early. The longer a dog has been reinforced for demanding stuff, the more persistent he'll be when you try to ignore him. However, ignoring him is the best answer to this behavior. No treats, no attention – not even eye contact. The instant the demand behavior starts, utter a cheerful "Oops!" and turn your back on your dog. When he's quiet, say, "Quiet, yes!" and return your attention – and treat – to him.

Beware "extinction bursts" and "behavior chains." When you're trying to extinguish a behavior by ignoring it, your dog may actually increase the intensity of his "I WANT IT NOW!" behavior. This is an extinction burst, akin to you kicking the soda machine that doesn't deliver after accepting your coins. If you succumb to your dog's increasing intense barking, thinking extinction isn't working, you have now reinforced the more intense barking, and your dog is likely to get more intense sooner next time. If you stick it out and wait for the barking to stop, you're well on your way to making it go away. You have to be more persistent than your dog.

A behavior chain is a series of behaviors strung together. You dog may learn that if he barks once or twice, you will turn your back, say "Quiet," and then feed him a treat. His short behavior chain is "bark . . . and then be quiet." To avoid this, be sure to acknowledge and reward him frequently before he barks even once.

Frustration Barking

Often confused with anxiety barkers, dogs who have a low tolerance for frustration bark persistently when they can't get what they want. Unlike anxiety barking, this is an "I WANT IT!" communication similar to demand barking, but with more emotion. It's usually directed at the thing he wants, such as the dog he wants to go play with.

You can use the positive interrupt to redirect frustration barking. If you consistently offer high-value treats in the presence of frustration-causing stimuli, you can condition your dog to look to you for treats when the other dog is present (dog = yummy treats) rather than erupt into a barking fit.

Greeting/Excitement Barking

"Yay, Mom's home! Mom's home!" If your dog hails you with hellos when you return after a long (or short) absence, it's time to shift into ignore mode. Stand outside your door and wait for the cacophony to subside, then enter calmly; no rousing hug-fests or "I missed you so much!" sessions. When your dog is calm and quiet, then greet him. If he starts to bark again, mark the barking with an "Oops!" and ignore some more.

If his loud greetings are directed toward arriving guests, you'll still need to go into calm mode. If you use loud verbal reprimands you add to the chaos and arousal. Rather, use your positive interrupt to invite your dog to you, and calmly put him in another room or on a tether – then greet your visitors. Alternatively, you can use counter-conditioning to get your dog to look to you for treats rather than erupting with barks when visitors arrive. You may want to tape a note to your door advising guests that you are training your dog and it may take you a moment or two to answer the door, so they don't give up and go away.

Play Barking

This is common behavior for herding dogs, the cheerleaders of the canine world. As other dogs – or humans – romp and play, the play-barker runs around barking (and sometimes nipping heels). If you're in a location where neighbors won't complain and the other dogs tolerate the behavior, you might just leave this one alone. With children, however, the behavior is not appropriate, and the dog should be managed by removing him from the play area, rather than risking bites to children.

If you do want to modify play-barking behavior, you can use negative punishment: The dog's behavior makes the good stuff go away. When the barking starts, use a time-out marker such as "Oops!" and gently remove your dog from the playground for one to three minutes; a tab (a

short, six- to 12-inch leash left attached to his collar) makes this maneuver easier. Then release him to play again.

Over time, as he realizes that barking ends his fun, he may get the idea. Or he may not – this is a pretty strong genetic behavior, especially with the herding breeds.

The Positive Interrupt

The positive interrupt is a well-programmed, highly reinforced behavior that allows you to redirect your dog's attention back to you when he's doing something inappropriate, like barking. Ideally, you want your dog's response to the "Over here!" cue to be so automatic that he doesn't stop to think, he just does it, the way your foot automatically hits the brake of your car when you see taillights flash in front of you on the highway.

Here's how to teach a positive interrupt:

1. Install the cue in a low-distraction environment. Use a phrase such as "Over here!" or "Quiet please!" as your interrupt cue. Say the phrase in a cheerful tone of voice, then immediately feed your dog a morsel of a very high-value treat, such as a small shred of canned chicken. Repeat until you see his eyes light up and his ears perk when you say the phrase.

2. Practice with the cue in a low-distraction environment. Wait until your dog is engaged in a low-value activity – wandering around the room, sniffing something mildly interesting – then say your interrupt phrase in the same cheerful tone of voice. You should see an immediate interrupt in his low-value activity, and he should dash to you for his chicken. If he doesn't, return to Step 1.

3. Add distractions to your practice. Still in the low-distraction environment so you can control the distraction level, add moderate distractions – one at a time – and practice the interrupt. Gradually move up to major distractions in the low-distraction environment. If you lose his automatic response at any step, return to the previous step.

4. Move your lessons to an environment with real-life distractions. Go for a walk around the block with your dog on leash. Use the interrupt when he's sniffing a bush, or eyeing a fast-food bag on the sidewalk. Start with mild to moderate real-life distractions if possible, but if a major distraction presents itself, including a stimulus that causes him to bark, give it a try!

5. Use the positive cue to interrupt barking. When your dog automatically turns his attention to you in response to your cue when confronted with major real-life distractions, you have a valuable tool for interrupting his barking. Be sure you practice occasionally with mild distractions to keep the cue "tuned up." And remember to thank him and tell him what a wonderful dog he is when he stops barking on your request.

Barky Breeds

Some breeds of dogs are notorious for being vocal, and even within breeds there are some lines that are known to bark more than others. There is a genetic component to a dog's vocal behavior (as behavior is always a combination of genetics and environment – nature and nurture.) Note that when we say a behavior is "genetic," what we really mean is that the dog has a strong inherited propensity to be reinforced by the opportunity to engage in that behavior. By definition, behaviors that are reinforced increase; a dog who finds barking reinforcing and has opportunities to bark will bark more.

Most of the herding breeds have strong opinions about things and aren't afraid to express them. Think Shetland Sheepdog, Collie, Border Collie, Australian Shepherd, Australian Kelpie . . . . Barking is part of the constellation of behaviors that were selected for over the years as these dogs were expected to be "large and in charge" when directing the movement of sheep and cows – animals many times their weight and size.

Scenthounds (such as Beagles, Bassets, Bloodhounds, etc.) have also been bred for their "voice." As they chase game, their excited baying tells their humans where they are, and enables hunters to find them when their quarry is treed or goes to ground.

Many small breeds of dogs (Chihuahua, Yorkshire Terrier, Miniature Pinscher) are known to be quite vocal. They have earned a reputation as "yappers" – making up for their diminutive size by making a lot of noise.

Then there are the dog breeds known to be at the quiet end of the canine vocalization continuum. Many of the Giant breeds – Danes and Newfoundlands, for example – are generally less vocal.

There are also many smaller breed dogs, including the French Bulldog, Cavalier King Charles Spaniel, and Shiba Inu, that have reputations for being non-talkative. And then there is the Basenji, which doesn't bark, but is capable of making a number of other alarming and annoying vocalizations. Rather than bark, these dogs can scream, growl, even yodel in a canine sort of way.

Whether you are looking for a quiet dog for townhouse living, or a vocal one to ward off trespassers from your rural home, knowing which breeds bark less is a good place to start. That said, it's also important to remember that, despite breed tendencies, every dog is an individual. You can find a Great Dane who will rattle your apartment walls, and a Sheltie who wouldn't speak if the safety of your farm depended on it. If voice, or lack thereof, is important to you, make sure you look beyond simple breed stereotypes to actual behavior when selecting your next canine family member.

Be Proactive with Dog Barking Modification

Uncontrolled barking can be frustrating to the human. I know this all too well, with two vocal herding dogs currently in my own family. However, our dogs sometimes have important and interesting things to say. There was the time I was engrossed in writing an article and our dogs were alarm barking ferociously in the backyard. Resisting the urge just to tell them to stop, I

reluctantly got up to investigate. No, the house wasn't on fire, but I did find a sick groundhog in the yard.

You do want to be able to have some control over your dog's voice, but don't lose sight of the value of his vocal communications – he may be trying to tell you something important. If you ignore him, your dog might do combat with a rabid skunk in the yard, a burglar might make off with all the bikes and tools in the garage, or Timmy might drown in the well!

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