

Dog Barking Advice



1. Introduction

Barking comes naturally to dogs, but constant barking or whining is not normal and may suggest that there is something wrong, such as excessive boredom, separation anxiety or medical problems.

Excessive barking can be very disturbing for the neighbours. In law a barking dog can be considered a noise nuisance or anti-social behaviour. A dog owner can be taken to court if they do nothing to stop the nuisance.

As each case is different, we can only provide some general guidance and we hope the below advice is useful. However, for specific advice you may need to contact a reputable behaviour specialist.

2. First Steps:

➤ **What not to do:**

- Don't shout at your dog, it will think you're joining in and may bark more
- Don't be aggressive towards your dog or hit or punish your dog
- Don't get a second dog unless you're sure its going to make your dog feel more secure, not less.

➤ **Practical solutions – things to try first:**

- Try to keep the dog in rooms furthest away from neighbours
- Don't leave your dog unattended in the garden
- See if a friend, relative or professional dog sitter can look after your dog when you go out, or take it with you (this may be a temporary measure to give neighbours immediate respite whilst other treatment / action is being taken. Alternatively, this may be required as a longer term measure if no other resolution can be found).
- Feed and exercise your dog before you go out and leave some fresh water. Also make sure that the room is not too hot or cold.
- If you aren't coming back until after dark, leave a light on.

➤ **Determine the extent of the barking and potential causes**

First of all, try and work out why your dog is barking. If you can remove the trigger, the barking should stop, although some training may also be needed.

Most complaints occur when the dog has been left unattended and you may not necessarily be aware of what your dog gets up to whilst you are out. As such you will need to monitor the dog, particularly whilst you are out - this will help you identify potential triggers and any action that you may need to take. For example, you could use a voice activated security camera or webcam.

Most dog owners we come into contact will get a noise activated 'doggy cam' that is connected to their smart phone, and this has helped identify suitable solutions.

- **Owners should act immediately by seeing their veterinary surgeon:**
- If their dog also escapes from the home when it is left
 - If their dog causes or is likely to cause damage to itself
 - If the dog is an older age and has recently become vocal, due to the possibility that the problem is caused by senility

3. Why do dogs bark?

There are many reasons. Here are some examples:

- **Attention** - if the dog is trying to get your attention they will seemingly bark for no reason and then stop as soon as you speak or look at them. The dog may bark any time the dog is feeling ignored.
- **Boredom** - barking may occur if the dog has nothing to do. Dogs may also be destructive in an effort to amuse themselves.
- **Excitement** – the dog may bark more frequently when it knows it is going for a walk or is going to be fed. These are highlights of the day and the dog barks to express its excitement.
- **Fear**– if the dog is scared, the dog may bark at strangers, dogs or in certain situations. Even small movements or eye contact from the fear object may start your dog barking, although this should stop when the dog is ignored.
- **Frustration** – the dog may bark because it can't get to something he finds exciting, for example perhaps it has seen a cat in the garden or heard people outside.
- **Loneliness/separation anxiety** – Dogs are not by nature solitary animals. They feel secure within a pack environment and regard their owners as their family group. This is why they can become distressed when they are left alone, particularly if left for several hours. The dog may bark when you leave the house and when you return the barking stops. Your return is consequently rewarding the barking.
- **Normality** – Barking may have accidentally been rewarded in the past. The dog may now perceive barking as acceptable behaviour.
- **Territorial** – dogs may bark if they are frustrated or when defending their territory but should not bark at everything that moves. Training can help them to tell the difference between, for example, people who are allowed in the house and intruders.

THE EFFECT OF LEARNING

The likelihood of a dog barking is determined by the species' inborn tendencies and breed predisposition, but also by what the dog learns throughout its life. For example:

Example 1: *Barking to deter people from entering the owner's property is related to natural territorial behaviour. However, if the dog barks at everyone who walks past in the street the behaviour can become an irritant. A main cause for the behaviour becoming excessive is the fact that most people go away. The dog, unable to realise that the person was going to go away again anyway, perceives their departure as the effect of its behaviour. This increases the dog's confidence to bark and the likelihood of it doing so on future occasions. Learning can also take place if owners try to control their dog's behaviour by shouting at it to stop. As dogs don't understand the meaning of words it may seem that their owners joining in the barking and bark even louder. Other dogs learn that barking at things outside the property makes their owners give them attention resulting in them barking at the slightest thing to get them to respond.*

Example 2: *Barking to get attention can be more direct. Dogs can learn to bark when their owners try to chat to visitors, use the telephone, watch television or interact with each other. Attempts to stop the noise simply rewards the attention seeking and encourages the dog to recommence as soon as it is ignored again.*

Example 3: *Some dogs vocalise when left alone in an attempt to call their owner back. Eventually the owner returns and the dog's perception is that vocalising works and will repeat it next time it is left. The cause often lies in the dog's overly dependent relationship with its owner when they are at home and resultant anxiety when they are absent.*

Most of the examples identified above can cause a noise nuisance and in almost all cases the successful resolution of the problem is dependent upon identifying and addressing the cause. Unless these facts are established the owner will not be able to address the problem because they will not know what action to take.

4. Potential Solutions

Your dog is barking for a reason – it's up to you to find out why. Once you know the reasons for it there are a number of different ways to combat the unwanted barking. One of the main principles is to distract the dog.

- **Attention**
 - This can often arise if your dog has inadvertently trained you to give them attention, so now you'll need to teach him that there are certain times when they cannot have attention.
 - Stop responding to vocal attention seeking behaviour. You should show that you are aware of what your dog is doing, but that you are not going to respond; by making eye contact and then looking away and ignoring further attempts to get you to respond. To make it clear that you are not going to react, you may need to also turn your head away or even walk out of the room
 - The dog should be given attention when it seeks it in another way e.g. by fetching and holding a toy

- The dog should be rewarded with attention for being settled and not seeking interaction with the owner
 - The dog should be asked to do something before being given attention. For example, it can be asked to sit. Again, this is best done whilst looking away from the dog, so that attention may be given by turning to the dog once it is sitting. Training dogs to perform an act like this will help to lower its expectation of having attention on demand and reduced the likelihood of it barking to get a response
 - The dog should receive sufficient exercise and mental stimulation so as to make the owner's attention throughout the day less important
 - If vocalising to get attention also occurs when are absent from home, you can provide things to occupy and settle the dog as you are leaving, such as chew toys or a few pieces of food scattered on the floor for it to find
 - Make sure that you give him lots of 'free' attention every day. If your dog is seeking attention because you ignore him unless he is annoying you with his barking, you won't be able to stop him – all dogs need social and physical contact and as far as they're concerned a telling off is better than no attention at all.
 - You should seek treatment advice, especially if their dog is vocal when they are not at home because attention seeking can be symptomatic of a more general disturbance in the dog's emotional state. This should start with the veterinary surgeon because ill health, old age, fear and anxiety can increase dependence upon the owner, the first sign of which is often increased attention seeking
 - You should ask neighbours not to talk to the dog when it barks for their attention, when they are in their garden for instance
- **Boredom**
 - Ensure your dog is getting enough exercise and enrichment. The more exercise the better – not necessarily long walks but stimulating walks, lots of smells and places to run. A tired dog barks less.
 - Toys are a great way of combating boredom. Some toys can be filled with food which the dog will try and retrieve during play (care must be taken not to over feed). There are also toys that promote the dog's puzzle solving skills.
 - Start by introducing some interesting activities into his routine. Try clicker training and simple puzzle-solving games (i.e. find the treat under a cup) and take him out more often during the day for calm walks with plenty of sniffing allowed. Keep interactions calm with plenty of gentle praise and rewards – the idea is to exercise the dog's mind, more so than body.
 - Don't leave your dog alone for long periods of time and try to get a dog walker if you are out at work all day
 - ***It is recommended that no dog is left for longer than three hours at any time.***
 - **Excitement**
 - If your dog is so excited because the rest of the day is so boring and quiet, try introducing some interesting activities into his routine – see the above tips for 'boredom'
 - Brush up on your dog's obedience training and train your dog to go and fetch a toy in his mouth. If you command him to do this every time he starts barking, he'll soon automatically do this – barking is a lot harder and quieter if a dog already has something in his mouth. Remember that asking a dog to do an alternative acceptable behaviour is far easier than asking to completely stop an unwanted behaviour.

- You could try exposing him to the barking 'triggers' repeatedly over a few days, ignoring his reaction and then praising / rewarding him as soon as he quiets down – but this can be a long and annoying process that may not work very well.
- Don't shout at him to stop barking as he may think that you are excited too and are joining in.
- **Fear**
 - Dogs that are scared bark to tell us that they are not happy and this is a good thing because it gives a warning that they cannot cope. Frightened dogs may eventually bite to get the 'scary' thing to go away and so it is important that you don't ignore the warning.
 - If your dog is scared of certain things or situations, making him face his fears is the worst thing to do. Instead, try to avoid them and ask your vet to refer you to a behaviourist who can help your dog to safely get over his fears.
 - You can provide a den for your dog to hide in if it wants to.
 - Sounds can be masked using the radio etc but not so loudly that this in itself causes a problem for neighbours.
 - Curtains and doors can be closed to prevent the dog being exposed to the sight of things that trigger fear.
 - A pheromone diffuser may help the dog settle when it is alone.
- **Frustration**
 - Find out what is making your dog bark and then, if you can, prevent him from seeing, hearing or smelling it. If you are going out, close the curtains and put the radio or television on to drown out offending noises.
 - Don't leave your dog alone for long periods or unattended in the garden, if this is where most of the barking occurs. Play more games with your dog, so he'll be too busy to bark.
 - You could try getting your dog used to certain sounds by recording them and playing them back at low volumes during times when he is already quiet and relaxed. Give him treats and lots of praise if when he stays relaxed.
 - Alternatively brush up on your basic training and have sessions where you ask for sits, downs and stands in a random manner, using lots of treats and praise, at times when the triggers present. This will help train your dog to be focussed on you, rather than the distractions.
 - Unneutered male dogs can smell a bitch in season up to 6 miles away. If this is contributing to the problem, consider talking to your vet about the possibility of castration.
 - If your dog is hungry (i.e. if he only has one meal a day), frustration and territorial behaviour can become worse. Make sure your dog has plenty to eat throughout the day – several smaller meals are far better than one large meal.
- **Loneliness / Separation Anxiety**
 - This type of problem can be serious and difficult to fix, you may need to consider contacting a behaviour specialist for help.
 - some dogs hate being left on their own and can suffer with 'separation anxiety'. But you need to help your dog get used to being left for different lengths of time and at different times of the day or night. This should mean they won't be so upset every time you leave them.
 - Don't make a fuss of your dog when you leave him.
 - Try putting the dog in another room for a few minutes alone then slowly build up the amount of time you leave them for – only return to the dog when they are quiet and then give them plenty of praise.

- Leave a TV or radio on – some dogs will settle down if they hear a human voice (Remember, not too loud, you don't want your neighbours to be disturbed by that instead).
- If this only happens at night when he is shut away to sleep by himself, consider letting him sleep in sight and sound of the family (e.g. on the landing with a baby gate) or in the bedroom with a family member.

- **Normality**
 - your dog will watch your routine and will know when you are going to leave. It may think its going for a walk when you go out and so bark with excitement. By changing your routine the dog will not be able to pinpoint when you are leaving.

- **Territorial**
 - Limit their territory – reduce the area your dog is left in. If the dog is free to roam around the house restrict it to one room, limiting the area it can defend.
 - If the dog barks when visitors arrive, keep the dog calm by using a reassuring voice. Train your dog to fetch a toy and when visitors come ask him to fetch the toy – it's more difficult for the dog to bark if it has hold of the toy.
 - Provide your dog with a mat or bed and place it near the door – but out of the way. Train your dog to go to this mat quietly when the doorbell rings. Keep a pot of treats by the door, so that visitors can toss him a treat as they enter, if the dog is quiet and relaxed on the mat.
 - As is the case for frustration – unwanted guarding behaviour can become worse if your dog is hungry.
 - If you are worried that your dog's guarding behaviour may become aggressive, you will need to seek the advice of a behaviour specialist.
 - The dog should be kept away from situations that may trigger barking, such as children making their way to and from school, perhaps by walking it.
 - The boundary should be secure to ensure other peoples' safety
 - Deliveries could be moved to a box away from the owner's home
 - You can leave music on to mask sounds outside but not so loud that it annoys neighbours.
 - The dog should be rewarded when it doesn't bark at things outside
 - The owner should not shout or rush to investigate the cause of the dog's barking because these will reward the behaviour with attention and add to the dog's excitement
 - The owner should consult their veterinary surgeon about behaviour therapy if the dog seems fearful of the things it barks at or barking at them also occurs away from home because this would be indicative of fear.
 - The dog should not have unsupervised access to locations where it is more likely to bark, such as a front garden or rooms at the front of the home
 - Windows should be kept closed so barking is less likely to be triggered
 - Close curtains, or cover the bottom of windows with glass-etch spray or stick on frosted plastic
 - The dog can be trained to recall and called indoors if it barks while it is in the garden

- Training is important so that your dog does not bark at just anything that moves. A well-trained dog should be able to tell between people allowed into the house and people who are intruders. Good training combined with affection should prevent your dog from developing bad habits but some dogs may need to see a vet so they can be referred to an animal behaviourist.

- Speak command – speak command: find something that makes your dog bark, such as the doorbell. Straight after the dog barks say your command – for example ‘speak’, ‘talk’ and use a hand signal. Reward the dog with treats. Repeat.
- Quiet command – when the dog is barking find something which stops the barking such as a clap or Pet corrector. Immediately after the dog stops barking use your quiet command such as ‘quiet’ stop’. Reward the dog for not barking after the command. Repeat.
- Its always best to find out the reason why the dog is barking. There are, however, other methods which are good at distracting the dog. These are known as a disruptive stimulus.
 - Spray collars – a spray collar works by surprising or distracting the dog and consequently disrupting the barking. The spray collar is activated when the dog barks. A spray is released in front of the dog’s nose which surprises the dog and stops it barking. The dog soon learns that if it barks (when the collar is on) there will be a noise and a smell which is unpleasant (but not painful) for the dog.

The device must never be allowed to run empty as the dog will learn it can empty it through barking. The spray collar must not be left on the dog unsupervised and must only be used after professional advice has been given.
 - Shock collars work differently and should not be used.
 - Pet corrector and similar products – these are cans of pressurised air that make a hissing sound and should only be used when the dog is barking. Use the quiet command as you used it. The dog should then be praised for being quiet. These products should only be used after professional advice has been given as this method can be stressful if not used correctly and must never be pointed at the dog’s face.

You may need to speak with your vet, a qualified animal behaviourist or dog trainer for further advice.