

BARKING

Barking is a major element of a dog's communication system. They bark to alert their pack of possible danger and to warn off perceived interlopers or predators. In our human/dog world (pack), this can be the dastardly trash truck in the alley, the meter reader, or other dogs and people walking down the street. The dogs also bark during play, to elicit play, in response to another dog's barking, to communicate a need (time to feed me or potty), to get your attention (my ball is under the couch or can we go for a walk), or to just express their feelings (you're home!). The dogs bark from instinctual catalysts such as "critters" like squirrels in their yard. And finally, the dogs can bark from sheer boredom. Barking is instinctual and is an extremely "self-reinforcing" behavior.

If your dog is barking out of boredom, this is your fault, not theirs. This indicates they need more appropriate outlets for their mental and physical energies. You may need to spend more time taking them for walks or playing ball. Or, you may need to provide some other form of mental and physical release such as an interactive toy or chew item. There are commercial toys available that gradually dispense treats as the dog plays with them. Also, the "real or sterile" bones purchased from pet stores are hollow and you can smush peanut butter or cheese in each end. The dogs will spend hours working to get their goodies.

When a dog is barking, most people "yell" at the dog to stop barking which is the worst thing you can do. This will only exacerbate the situation. Consider the dogs' hearing is their second most acute sense, only exceeded by their sense of smell. When we "yell", our voice/commands become distorted due to the dogs' acutely sensitive hearing. This is similar to turning up the volume on the television until the words are distorted and unrecognizable to you. Moreover, when this occurs, these loud and distorted sounds almost hurt our ears and we frantically rush to get the volume down to an acceptable level.

We think we have to yell to be heard over the dogs' barking, but we are actually producing NOISE that the dogs do not "hear" as understandable words/commands. We can sound like another barking dog or just another sound that would elicit a bark response. Consider that one barking dog causes another dog to bark. When we yell, we create a barking frenzy between us and our dogs which increases and incites the very barking behavior you want to stop.

If you physically react in an over excited, over stimulated manner this will also infuse your dog's already excited and stimulated emotional state. Our overt verbal and physical reactions can actually validate and reinforce the dog's behavior. Think about when your dog is barking in response to the doorbell. You frantically try to quiet them by yelling at them and even trying to physically contain them. Their barking and physical reactions increase proportionally to your emotional state. The dogs honestly do not recognize your distress as being at them or because they are barking. Rather, your behaviors are telling them that whatever is on the other side of the door is truly something to be excited, concerned, or very upset about.

To properly modify your dog's barking and accompanying behaviors, you must remain calm verbally and physically. You want to DIFFUSE, NOT INFUSE their emotional state. The key is to get your dog's attention. Calmly approach them and raise their head so they are looking at you. Tell them "no bark" in a controlled and firm tone. The instant they stop barking, tell them "good, no bark". Immediately, you will want to DIVERT their attention to another behavior and away from the original catalyst. This may mean a toy, sitting for a treat, or running to another room or their crate for a treat. You can even train them to run to a certain spot and sit for a treat. Initially, this "spot" should be concretely defined such as a small rug.

As with any training or behavior modification program, you must be consistent, patient, and understanding. The dogs learn behaviors we want through "patterning". This is especially true of behaviors that are contradictory to the basic nature of being a dog. To ensure consistency, you may need to prevent your dog from being stimulated to bark at certain catalysts when you cannot reinforce the new behavior(s). Barking is "self reinforcing" and while you are patterning the new behavior(s), you do not want your dog to be self reinforced by engaging in barking that goes unchecked. This may mean keeping them out of a particular area, blocking their "view" of external catalysts, and/or using another sound (television or radio) to mask outside sounds they could react to during the time you are working to "pattern train" new reactions and behaviors to those catalysts. Consequently, you do not want them to encounter any of the catalysts that would normally elicit their barking when you are not there to "reinforce" the alternative behavior(s) you are patterning.

Successfully patterning any new behavior is directly governed by your efforts, consistency, patience, and understanding. When dealing with barking and other instinctual and innate behaviors, you are asking a dog to behave in a manner that is contradictory to their basic nature. The manner you choose to handle these behaviors will either positively or negatively impact your dog and their resultant behaviors. The choice is yours. In teaching your dog anything, please take the time to understand and realize what your dog is doing and why and how your reactions are affecting their behaviors and emotional state.

BARK COLLARS AND OTHER ANTI-BARK MECHANISMS AND METHODS:

I am not a proponent of bark collars or other types of anti- bark mechanisms. There are many commercial products that profess to work to stop or control barking. These products have varying degrees of success and failure. Some do not work at all. Other products do seem to work to a degree with some dogs and not at all with other dogs. While there are some success stories, there are vastly more stories of these products having no effect at all, or at least not long term effects, in situations with a high level of bark stimulus. For example, dogs wearing the citronella bark collars will often bark even more furiously to get the mist to stop which it does when the collar is empty.

The mechanisms that emit a “sound” can work for some dogs. However, even the dogs that react to the sounds by not barking can become desensitized to the sound if it is misused and overused. At this point, the “sound” just becomes another noise that will actually elicit and/or incite the barking behavior. I discuss this a bit more in the SHAKE CAN section. Also, keep in mind that any “sound” emitted in a bark situation ostensibly is only a “startle/stop” mechanism and it is up to you to divert them to a different behavior.

PLEASE NOTE THAT I AM ADAMANTLY OPPOSED TO “SHOCK” COLLARS OF ANY FORM AND FOR ANY SITUATION.

Some people use a “squirt bottle or water toy” to dispense a spray of water at the dog to stop various behaviors including barking. As a rule, I am not a proponent of this method for dealing with barking or any behavior. The water squirting method has a relatively low percentage of effectiveness across the board and can actually cause unexpected reactions from your dog. Some dogs bark AT the water because they see it as some sort of a threat or unpleasantness that needs to be dealt with to make it “go away”. Other dogs think the water is something to play with or is a play elicitation. Some dogs may be frightened of the water and run away. They may actually continue barking as they run off.

You need to be very observant of your dog’s reactions to the squirting water. Evaluate their reactions in relationship to the end result you are attempting to achieve. Even if your dog does stop barking, when they have an overtly negative reaction you may be creating another problem that could have far reaching ramifications. Never take your dog’s reactions lightly. Listen to what their reactions are telling you and make appropriate decisions about whether to continue this method or any method. Listen to their reactions through “dog speak”, not human speak. Do not expect one dog to have the same reactions as another dog. Every dog will react differently.

Some people keep squirting the dog when they do not get the desired reaction. This rarely, if ever, works and should NOT be done. I have had people tell me they kept squirting until the dog was soaked and to no avail and often caused an increased or exacerbated response. Worse still are the people who use lemon juice, vinegar, Bitter Apple, Tabasco or hot sauce, or some other bitter tasting or caustic liquid in the squirt bottle. The concept is to squirt the bitter tasting liquid INTO the dog’s mouth. Unfortunately, much of the liquid ends up ON the dog’s face and IN their eyes. Some of these items can cause skin irritations and almost all can cause serious eye irritations. When something causes eye irritation, it can quickly progress to an eye infection, abrasion, or ulceration caused by the liquid OR caused by the dog rubbing their eyes when they sting and burn.

NEVER USE ANYTHING OTHER THAN WATER WHEN SQUIRTING TOWARD ANY DOG BECAUSE THE LIQUID WILL LIKELY END UP ON THEIR FACE OR IN THEIR EYES!!

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