

Barking

The Motivation

Barking is one of the ways dogs communicate with the world. There is a wide variety of vocalizations, and most humans find many of them to be a nuisance behavior. Oftentimes, it is desirable to have a dog bark less but still bark in some situations, so we must be able to discriminate why our dog is barking. Dogs can bark because of an intruder/stranger, excitement, fear, frustration, or for fun - since barking is a self-reinforcing behavior! There are breeds that are more prone to barking because of the reinforcing nature of “talking.”

Prevention & Management

Because there are a variety of causes of barking, the approaches to manage and lessen the barking are different. If your dog is barking at a specific noise or physical trigger, preventing exposure to those triggers may lessen the barking. For example, dogs who bark at people and/or dogs through windows may reduce barking if window clings are put up on those windows, so your dog’s triggers are no longer visible. If your dog is barking at you or barking at a door to go outside, we must make other behaviors more reinforcing than barking.

Problem Solving

Since barking is so easily reinforced, we must know the cause and reinforcement of the barking in order to try to reinforce an alternative behavior.

1. When your dog is barking at a door to go outside, ask your dog for an alternative behavior such as a sit or simple name recognition. By reinforcing an alternative behavior, they will become more likely to perform that behavior again if it means going outside. After your dog responds to a cue, you can reapproach the door and let them outside or engage in another activity with them.
2. If your dog is barking at you, try to ignore the behavior. For some dogs, talking to them (even in a harsh tone) or looking at them can be reinforcing. When the dog offers 1-3 seconds of silence, reinforce the absence of barking. If your dog continues to bark, you can ask for an alternative behavior as mentioned above. Continue to reinforce them when they are not barking.
3. Barking while outside at people and/or dogs can be for a variety of reasons. Depending on the motivation for barking, there are slightly different approaches to helping you and your dog.



Animal Matters Training & Swim

www.animalmatterstraining.com

info@animalmatterstraining.com

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Important Notes

Positive punishment such as verbal or physical reprimands are counterproductive to eliminate barking. By shouting at your dog, physically correcting your dog, or using aversive equipment (shock collars, bark collars, etc.), you cannot control what behavior you are punishing and risk fallout and undesirable side effects. For example when your dog receives a shock every time they bark at a stranger, your dog may associate seeing a stranger with a negative stimulus. Even if you are intending to punish your dog barking, your dog may associate the punishment with the stimulus they are barking at. Try to be proactive in rewarding your dog before they begin barking, so they do not continue to rehearse the behavior and remaining silent can become more reinforcing.

The intricacies of barking make it difficult to diagnose and address the problem on your own. Please reach out to a certified trainer for help understanding your dog's barking and how to minimize the occurrence of it.



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