Excessive Barking: A Common Behavior Problem

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

Fact: Dogs bark.
Fact: Barking can be good.
Fact: Barking can drive us nuts.

Dogs bark. It is part of their normal and natural communication and behavior. Dogs can bark for appropriate and good reasons, such as when strangers approach our house, they hear an odd noise, or they are herding sheep. Most of us want our dogs to be "watch dogs" and alert us to anything unusual. But dogs can also bark inappropriately. In two scientific surveys of dog owners, approximately 1/3 of them reported their dogs barked excessively. To control barking in our dogs, we first need to understand why they are barking.

Types of canine vocal communication

Dogs, as well as wolves use many types of vocalizations to communicate. This communication starts very early in life. Young puppies make a mewing-like sound when they are searching for food or warmth. Louder crying sounds are heard if the puppy is hurt or frustrated. As dogs get older, they make five main classes of sounds: howls, growls, grunts, whines, and barks. Each of these classes of sounds is used in different situations.

Howling is used as a means of long-range communication in many different circumstances. Howls are more often associated with wolves, but dogs howl too. Wolves often howl to signify territorial boundaries, locate other pack members, coordinate activities such as hunting, or attract other wolves for mating. Dogs may howl as a reaction to certain stimuli such as sirens.

Growling can occur in very different activities. It is used to threaten, warn, in defense, in aggression, and to show dominance. But growling is also used in play as well. By looking at the body posture we should be able to tell the difference. Growls during aggression are accompanied by a stare or snarl, and the growling dog often remains stationary. Play-growls occur in combination with a happy tail and a play bow to signal willingness to play. These dogs are often moving and jumping about to entice play.

Grunts in dogs are the equivalent of contented sighs in people. They can also be heard when dogs are greeting each other or people.

Whines or whimpers are short- or medium-range modes of communication. Dogs may whine when they greet each other, are showing submissiveness, are frustrated or in pain, to obtain attention, and sometimes in defense. Dogs generally whine more than wolves, perhaps because they use the whine more as an attention-seeking behavior, and are often rewarded for it. Think about it. The first sound you may hear from a new puppy is the whine at night when he finds himself alone. We often are guilty of unintentionally reinforcing this whining by giving the puppy the attention he wants.

Barking is another mode of communication that seems to be more common in dogs than other canine species. Again, this may be the result of human encouragement. Certain breeds have been bred to bark as part of their watchdog or herding duties. Barking is used to alert or warn others and defend a territory, to seek attention or play, to identify oneself to another dog, and as a response to boredom, excitement, being startled, lonely, anxious, or teased.

Why dogs bark

- Alert/warning barks are the type of barks some owners encourage. They want their dog to alert them to the presence of a danger or suspicious stranger. Warning barks tend to become more rapid as the intruder approaches. Aggressive barks are low in pitch and may be combined with growls. We need to be able to distinguish warning barks from barks due to fear.

  Attention-seeking barks are most often used by puppies to get you to focus your attention on them. They can become very insistent and hard to ignore, but ignore them we must.

  Play/excitement barks are often short and sharp. These barks are common if the dog gets too excited with the game. Often a time-out is in order.

  Self-identification barking is what you may be hearing when your dog seems to be answering other dogs he hears barking in the neighborhood. It is his way of saying, "I am over here."

  Bored barkers simply need an outlet for their energy and a more stimulating environment.

  Lonely/anxious barking occurs if your dog is experiencing separation anxiety. The barking can become self-reinforcing as he becomes more stimulated and anxious. Anxious barks tend to get higher in pitch as the dog becomes more upset. This type of barking can be especially annoying to your neighbors.

*Unauthorized use of any images, thumbnails, illustrations, descriptions, article content, or registered trademarks of **Foster & Smith, Inc.** is strictly prohibited under copyright law. Site content, including photography, descriptions, pricing, promotions, and availability are subject to change without notice. These restrictions are necessary in order to protect not only our copyrighted intellectual property, but also the health of pets, since articles or images that are altered or edited after download could result in misinformation that may harm companion animals, aquatic life, or native species.*

Startle barking occurs in response to an unfamiliar or sudden sound or movement. As with an alert/warning bark, we need to be able to control this type of barking quickly.

As you can see, there are many reasons for barking and **most barking is a normal behavior.** There are some instances in which barking is considered pathological. This will be discussed later in the article.

Characteristics of a barker

Studies have been done to try to determine which dogs are more likely to be barkers. Although there was no difference in the percentage of excessive barkers between males and females, there was a breed difference. Beagles, Terriers, and some herding breeds tend to bark more. That is not surprising, since this is one of the characteristics for which they were bred. Excessive barking can occur in purebred dogs as well as mixed breeds.

General principles for controlling undesirable barking

- If we want to control barking, we need a dog who can obey us and relax. The dog needs to look to her owner for behavior clues. If we can call her, have her lie down (dogs do not bark as much when lying down) and stay, we are well on the way to solving a nuisance barking problem. In addition, there are some common principles we can use in modifying barking behavior.

- First, in most cases shouting "No" is only going to make matters worse since the dog is thinking you are barking too (and is probably happy you joined in).
- Be consistent. Pick a one-word command e.g., "Enough" for the behavior you want and always use that word in the same tone of voice. Everyone in the household must use the same command and act identically.
- Be patient with your dog and yourself. Changing behavior takes a lot of time, and you need to take it slowly, one step at a time. If you become angry at your dog, the chance to correctly modify the behavior will be gone.
- Reward the dog for good behavior. Positive reinforcement is much more powerful than punishment. Physical punishment will do nothing but make your dog fearful of you and break down the bond you wish to have with her. Food treats are fine to use as a reward at first. Often, picking a very special treat like small pieces of cooked chicken or hot dog will make the reward seem even better. As time goes on, you will not give a treat every time, sometimes just rewarding with a "Good Dog" and a pat on the dog's chest.
- Do not hug your dog, talk soothingly, or otherwise play into your dog's barking. Your dog may then believe there really was something of which to be alarmed, afraid, or anxious. This reinforces her behavior and she will likely bark even more the next time.
- Control the situation. As much as possible, set up situations to use as training. Practice in short, frequent sessions, generally 5-10 minutes each.
- Do not be afraid to ask an expert. Animal trainers, behaviorists, and your veterinarian can give you valuable advice. Having them witness your dog's barking episodes may give them valuable clues on helping you solve the barking problem.

Next, we will look at the different types of barkers and more specific ways to modify their behavior.

Alert/warning barkers

Dogs that bark at mail carriers, joggers running by the house, or cyclers on the street naturally have their barking reinforced. They see the mail carrier, they bark, and the mail carrier leaves. The dog thinks, "Boy, I'm good. My barking made that person leave." In modifying the dog's behavior, we need to overcome this reinforcement.

Sometimes, by just preventing the dog from seeing the intruding mail carrier, we can solve the problem. Often, however, we need to do more. First, we must make sure we are not rewarding the dog for any type of barking. If the dog barks when she wants to eat, and we feed her, we are rewarding vocalization. If we try to ignore the barking, but eventually cave-in and give attention, the dog learns that short barks will not do the trick, but excessive and extended barking will.

After the dog has alerted us to an "intruder," we need a way to signal the dog after one or two barks that she was a good dog for warning us, but now we will take control. Often the command "Enough" will accomplish that goal.

> Remember: Do not inadvertently reinforce barking by giving verbal or physical reassurance to a barking dog.

To teach "Enough," set up a situation in which your puppy will bark, but not excessively; knock on the door, for instance. After one or two barks, stop knocking and make a sound or distraction that will get her to switch her attention to you. If she stops barking, immediately say "Enough" and reward her with a treat and praise. If she does not stop barking, put that delicious treat right in front of her nose. When she stops barking for a second or two say "Enough," wait a few more seconds and if she is quiet, give her the treat and praise. Timing is critical – she must be quiet when you give her the treat or she will think she is being rewarded for continuing to bark. Be sure to say "Enough" when she is quiet, not when she is barking. Later, as she associates "Enough"

*Unauthorized use of any images, thumbnails, illustrations, descriptions, article content, or registered trademarks of **Foster & Smith, Inc.** is strictly prohibited under copyright law. Site content, including photography, descriptions, pricing, promotions, and availability are subject to change without notice. These restrictions are necessary in order to protect not only our copyrighted intellectual property, but also the health of pets, since articles or images that are altered or edited after download could result in misinformation that may harm companion animals, aquatic life, or native species.*

with being quiet, you can use it as a command to stop barking.

Fear barkers

Some dogs may start with an alert or warning bark, but then progress to a bark that is associated with fear. One of the more common examples of this is those dogs that bark at approaching strangers.

If your dog is barking out of fear of people, first he must learn to be obedient, defer to you for his behavior cues, and relax. Then you can start setting up situations in which people approach from far off, and as your dog remains relaxed, give him treats. Slowly (over days and weeks) have people approach him only to the point where he remains relaxed and you can reward him. As people come even closer, have them throw treats his way so he starts associating people with good things happening. While this controlled training is going on, it is best to not put him in situations in which you do not have control, e.g., walking down a busy street.

Do not encourage your puppy to bark at people. You may set a bad habit in motion and he may become suspicious and even fearful of people. Chances are, he will bark at odd situations and strangers without you telling him to.

Attention-seeking barkers

Young puppies, as well as adults soon learn that barking will incite attention from us. The problem is that dogs will be happy with any attention they receive, be it negative or positive. A stern "No" from you is still attention, so the puppy got what she wanted and you reinforced the behavior. It is best to just ignore this type of barking, as hard as that may be.

Sometimes, the use of a remote correction is helpful in controlling this type of barking. Coins in an empty soda can, foghorns, or other noisemakers can be used to startle the dog while she is barking. When she is startled, she stops barking, and at that point, you can give her a substitute for barking – a toy, a walk. Just make sure she stops barking before you give the substitute or the dog will perceive it as a reward for barking.

Play/excitement barkers

If your dog barks excessively during play, it is best to let her calm down and slow down the game. If she continues to bark, stop playing until she has settled down.

Self-identification barkers

This type of barking is quite instinctive and can sometimes be difficult to control, especially in a household of multiple dogs. Often there is an instigator dog and all other dogs join in. This type of barking may be controlled using a similar approach to alert/warning barks, i.e., obedience and relaxation methods with a substitute behavior offered, like playing with a toy.

Bored barkers

Dogs who bark when they are bored may be similar to dogs seeking attention or those that are lonely. Dogs who are bored need something to do besides barking. We need to give them a more stimulating environment and usually a lot more exercise. A tired dog is less likely to be bored. Toys such as Kongs and Buster Cubes that can be filled with treats can get your dog's brain, as well as his body, working.

Lonely/anxious barkers

Dogs who bark when they are alone may be showing a symptom of their separation anxiety. As we mentioned, these dogs are in the midst of a vicious circle – the more lonely they are, the more they bark, the more upset they get, the more they bark, the barking gets them more upset and they bark more – and the cycle continues.

We need to work with the dog on the underlying behavior of separation anxiety. We can do this several ways. As in alert/warning barking, we need to be able to teach the dog simple obedience and how to relax. Then we can work on the problem of the separation anxiety.

We can start out by leaving or acting like we are leaving for a short time - and before the dog starts getting nervous and barking (this may be one second at first), we come back. This way, we are not rewarding barking, but rewarding relaxation and silence. We gradually extend the time we are gone and return before the dog gets anxious. If your dog is anxious even if you leave the room, then you will need to start by just taking several steps away from her while she remains relaxed. While going through this behavior modification, you cannot go too slow – you can go too fast.

We often need to change our habits too. Often the dog starts getting nervous when we go through our routine of leaving. Maybe you are like me, and the last thing you do before you leave is put on your shoes and pick up the keys. Vary this and put on your shoes and pick up your keys – but do not leave. Go to the couch and read a book. If you only play the radio on weekends when you are home, turn it on during your workdays. As hard as it may be, set your alarm on weekends, get up, but stay home. Continue these changes in routine until your dog does not pay attention to your cues anymore. It is also very important to not give your dog a lot of attention when you leave.

When you are gone, make sure your dog is comfortable – light, warmth, a radio playing, toys. If your dog is outside, a doghouse may help her feel more secure. Some indoor dogs will be more content if they can watch what is going on outside, be it traffic or chipmunks. Others may be more anxious if they can look out and do better with the drapes closed. You will need to decide what makes your dog less anxious. Make sure you give your dog a lot of exercise a half hour or so before you leave. As with boredom, tired dogs are less likely to become anxious.

*Unauthorized use of any images, thumbnails, illustrations, descriptions, article content, or registered trademarks of **Foster & Smith, Inc.** is strictly prohibited under copyright law. Site content, including photography, descriptions, pricing, promotions, and availability are subject to change without notice. These restrictions are necessary in order to protect not only our copyrighted intellectual property, but also the health of pets, since articles or images that are altered or edited after download could result in misinformation that may harm companion animals, aquatic life, or native species.*

If your dog happens to not only bark, but destroy things while you are gone, a crate may be necessary. Never punish your dog when you come home and find something chewed or torn. If you do, your dog will soon associate your return with being punished. That is going to make her even more anxious. If you videotape these destructive dogs, you may see the dog is anxious when the owner leaves but anxiety also increases just before the owner's usual time of return, when the dog becomes anxious about the owner's impending return and punishment.

Just as you should not punish your dog on your return, do not give her a lot of attention either - then your returning home will not be such a big deal to her. Instead, come in the door, say "Hello" and go about a household task. Once your dog has settled down and is quiet, then you can spend some quality time with her.

Initially, while you are working on behavior modification it may be helpful to get a neighbor or pet sitter to come in once or several times during the day. This will help break up the long hours the dog has without you.

Finally, if the separation anxiety is severe, medications are often needed during the behavior modification process. Medication alone will not solve the problem, but it can be a useful adjunct to the process. Consult with your veterinarian to determine which medication would be most appropriate.

Startled barkers

We can best curb startled barking using the similar techniques for alert/warning barks. Teaching "Enough" will really help in this situation. If a certain sound consistently startles your dog, record that sound. Start by playing it back very softly so your dog will remain relaxed when she hears it. If she remains quiet, then reward her. Over days and weeks, gradually increase the volume until she is no longer startled into barking when she hears it.

Pathologic barking

Barking that is a simple nuisance is not the same as barking that is pathologically excessive. Most of the barking we have talked about thus far is normal barking behavior except for that connected to separation anxiety. Barking can be abnormal or "pathologic" in situations of separation anxiety, as a result of an obsessive-compulsive disorder in which a dog barks very excessively or at inappropriate things (a leaf falling), or in dogs who become hyper-excited with the approach of people or other dogs. Dogs who become aggressive during barking episodes need to undergo behavior modification for the aggression before we attempt to modify the barking behavior.

For dogs with pathologic barking or additional behavioral problems, it is highly recommended to use a team-approach to the problem. The team consists of all family members, an animal behaviorist, and a veterinarian. Each family member must work with the dog in the same way, using the same commands. The animal behaviorist may be able to cue in on unique characteristics of your dog's behavior and help you set up training situations that will be most effective. Your veterinarian may also be able to give you insights as well as prescribe appropriate medications to enable the dog to be more responsive to the behavior modification.

Controlling barking through corrective collars

There are numerous collars on the market that produce an electrical stimulation, an irritating ultrasonic sound, or a smell (offensive to the dogs, but not to us) when the dog barks. These may be used as an adjunct to behavior modification. Collars alone will not cure the problem. Unfortunately, these collars to do not always produce the desired effect. For some of these hard-core barkers, the punishment for barking is not sufficient to get them to stop. They would rather bark and be punished than not bark at all. For dogs who bark when they are anxious, the collar's correction may make them even more anxious.

In some situations, these corrective collars have been found to be useful. For instance, there is a citronella collar which gives off a citrus smell when the dog barks. This can alert you to the fact the dog was barking while you were gone since the citrus smell still lingers in the air. In situations where you must change the barking behavior quickly or you may lose your dog (or apartment), a bark-control collar may be used while you are away from the dog. When using a bark-control collar, remember that you not only have to stop the bad behavior, you need to reward the good. Your dog can not learn an appropriate alternative to barking if someone is not present to teach it to him.

Another type of collar that may be effective is a halter collar. This type of collar looks more like a horse halter; brand names include Gentle Leader/Promise System Canine Head Collar and Halti Head collars. When you pull on the leash portion, a portion of the collar tightens around the dog's muzzle. By using a quick pull of the lead, saying "Enough" when the dog is quiet, and then rewarding him, you may find the training goes faster.

De-barking

Debarking is a surgical procedure that removes the vocal cords from dogs. There are two surgical approaches, one through the mouth, and the other through an incision in the neck. Debarking will NOT result in a silent dog. A dog who has undergone the procedure will still attempt to bark, and make a hoarse sound, which some people find more irritating than the bark itself. Debarking will not cure the reason for barking – the fear, boredom, or anxiety will still be there.

Preventing nuisance barking in puppies

Teaching your puppy appropriate behavior from the beginning is easier than changing behavior that has become a bad habit. Some behavior we may think of as cute in a puppy will not be cute in an adult dog. So, think ahead to avoid potential problems.

*Unauthorized use of any images, thumbnails, illustrations, descriptions, article content, or registered trademarks of **Foster & Smith, Inc.** is strictly prohibited under copyright law. Site content, including photography, descriptions, pricing, promotions, and availability are subject to change without notice. These restrictions are necessary in order to protect not only our copyrighted intellectual property, but also the health of pets, since articles or images that are altered or edited after download could result in misinformation that may harm companion animals, aquatic life, or native species.*

The first few nights after bringing your puppy home will be the hardest. You may want to put his crate in your bedroom. The puppy will be more secure with you near. Security builds trust. Trust will decrease the possibility of separation anxiety in the future. Just remember not to give any attention to the puppy if he is whining – that will only reward his undesirable behavior.

By starting to train your puppy in obedience and relaxation at an early age, you can greatly reduce the probability your puppy will grow into a problem barker. Nip problems in the bud and always look at why the puppy is barking. Is it fear, anxiety, attention-seeking? Use the appropriate measures to treat the underlying problem.

Remember that if for some reason you want your dog to bark on command, or in a certain situation, you must also be able to teach him to stop on command. Teach "Enough" at an early age. This was described under "Alert/warning Barkers".

Introduce the young puppy to situations that may cause anxiety later on. Get your puppy used to walking on the sidewalk along a busy street. Expose your puppy to sounds like vacuum cleaners, hair dryers, and other noises. Take things slow so your puppy does not become anxious while being exposed to these new things. Reward the puppy when he is quiet and relaxed.

Puppy classes are a great place for your puppy to meet new people and other dogs. He can learn to obey you even when there are numerous distractions. You also have a trainer present who can help you with any potential problems.

In short, it will be a lot more fun for everybody if your puppy learns to communicate through a wag of the tail and looking to you for guidance rather than through excessive and relentless barking.

*Unauthorized use of any images, thumbnails, illustrations, descriptions, article content, or registered trademarks of **Foster & Smith, Inc.** is strictly prohibited under copyright law. Site content, including photography, descriptions, pricing, promotions, and availability are subject to change without notice. These restrictions are necessary in order to protect not only our copyrighted intellectual property, but also the health of pets, since articles or images that are altered or edited after download could result in misinformation that may harm companion animals, aquatic life, or native species.*