



HOW CAN I STOP MY DOG FROM BARKING?

The truth about continuous barking is this--it drives humans nuts! Few people are bothered by a dog that barks for 10 or 15 minutes at obvious distractions. However, the dog that barks and barks--for hours, and days, and nights--can cause major headaches for an owner. Some dog barking is acceptable and normal--other barking is a major symptom that something is wrong in the dog's world.

Barking can be classified in several categories--depending on whether you are the dog's owner or neighbor! It is the chronic or excessive barker that concerns us here. These terms are subjective, and all dogs are going to bark at times. Symptoms of the chronic or excessive barking dog include:

- The dog barks continually or in a pattern, such as "bark, bark, bark, pause, bark bark, bark, pause," or any other combination of repetitive barks and pauses.
- The dog barks at anything and everything, including falling leaves or high-flying birds.
- The dog barks for hours at a time.

Once you determine that you have a problem barker, you must accept the fact that, however unintentionally, as owner you are part of the problem. Inadvertent ways to encourage a dog to bark include, but are not limited to, appearing and yelling at a dog to stop the noise; encouraging a dog to bark at anyone or anything; confining the dog for long periods; or attempting to address the dog's needs when it was barking (i.e.: feeding, petting, or consoling the barker).

Even a tiny amount of unintentional reinforcement can cause an otherwise well-behaved dog to develop a serious problem. The very act of barking excites the dog, and is, to some extent, a reward in and of itself. If a dog, however erroneously, believes its owner likes its barking, the behavior is reinforced.

One cause of problem barking is the novel or threatening situation. Dogs are by nature territorial, and warning barks can be advantageous and desirable. However, some dogs can take it too far, and seem to believe that any human, animal, or object within their sight, hearing, or smell is a potential threat. These dogs are often much more reactive than the owner bargained for. Sometimes, an owner that reacts with fear or suspicion to unexplained noises and new people may be unconsciously encouraging their dog to react with protectiveness, including barking and aggression.

Owners often unknowingly encourage problem barking when they (1) appear at a door or window, and (2) yell at the dog to stop barking. The owner, at this point, is usually annoyed, and dogs are quite capable of perceiving this annoyance. To the dog, the owner also is joining in to express disapproval at the "threat." Further, the barking has gotten the owner's attention, and created an opportunity for dog/owner interaction.

Other causes of problem barking include the dog's loneliness, boredom, or frustration. After all, dogs are extremely social animals, and many owners simply do not understand the critical canine need for social interaction. Dogs need, and crave, attention, exercise, and stimulation. Without them, sooner or later, the animal will manifest "problem behaviors."

Of course, many things that seem to be causes of a dog's continuous barking are actually only symptoms. The cause is often the owner's unintentional rewarding of the dog's behavior. For example, let's imagine a dog confined to a crate while the owner works. Having been gone all day, both dog and owner are excited and pleased with the prospect of a reunion. The dog barks, and, on cue, the owner releases it from the crate. The dog is, in essence, rewarded for barking.

To solve this problem, the owner has to stop rewarding the barking. The dog can be distracted with playtime or petting, or the owner can reward the dog for being silent. A noisy dog should not be released from confinement until it has calmed down.

Owners can help dogs that must endure long periods of confinement. A partial solution is to leave stimulating toys that keep the animal entertained. It may also help to leave on the television or radio, and even a couple of lights, so that the dog does not perceive a radical change in its environment between the times the owner is home and away.

The dog that receives a treat or toy for "speaking," or the trained bark, may also bark on their own in anticipation of more "reward." Remember, if a dog barks and gets results, the barking will increase. If a dog barks, and there is no result, the barking will decrease. Dogs can be quite adept at training their owners! Part of the solution to this problem is to ignore the barking completely. Although initially the barking may increase, most dogs give up rather quickly. Dogs do what works for them.

Owners can "pre-condition" their dogs to bark. This happens when the beloved, pampered, "housedog," for whatever reason, is "banished" to the yard. The dog, used to being a part of the family pack and receiving lots of attention, is now abandoned, ignored, and given the doggy equivalent of solitary confinement. This is a recipe for disaster.

Barking can become an established behavior. At this point, owner intervention is usually necessary. The following tips may help lessen the severity of the problem.

The barking dog's exercise and activity level should be significantly increased. Find games to play and tricks and commands to teach that challenge the dog's mind and engage his natural instincts. Do NOT feed the dog "performance" foods--look for protein levels of 16-20%.

Scheduling is also important. Routine schedules give dogs a sense of security. Scheduling feeding, walks, and playtime helps teach a dog that the owner, not the dog, makes the decisions about when something occurs, and that its needs will be met at the appropriate time.

It should be obvious that most problem barking can be resolved when the underlying causes are addressed. Unfortunately, this is not always the case--some dogs become so set in their barking behavior that simply addressing the causes isn't enough. In these cases, the owners may want to consider additional correction measures.

For especially difficult cases, "anti-bark" collars may be an option. There are several types available, including citronella collars and electronic collars. Both types are activated by the dog's barking. The former type works by releasing a brief spray of citronella--while harmless, dogs dislike the smell. The electronic collars work by administering a shock to the dog when it barks. The stimulation serves as a correction to the dog, but is not harmful. Some owners believe that the electronic collars are too harsh, but the correction is mild. Both types work well if used properly.

If an anti-bark collar is chosen, the dog should be given a few days to simply get used to wearing it before it is activated. The dog should also be allowed to wear an inactive collar for a few days at the end of training. This is because some dogs learn that they only receive a correction when the collar is on--these smart ones will bark again when the collar is removed. It takes most dogs from 10 to 14 days to learn a new behavior. It can take much longer to break an established behavior.

WARNING: If an electronic collar is chosen, be advised that the stimulation can trigger defensive aggression --directed toward humans or other animals--in the dog. The dog's accessibility to humans and other animals should be limited during training with an activated collar.

Electronic collars are best used as a last resort. Understanding why dogs bark, and we, as humans, might unknowingly encourage excessive barking, often helps resolve the problem. However, problem barking does not start in a day, and may take some time and patience to solve. But it can be done, and both owner and dog will be happier with the silence.

Tips to Control Barking

1. Teach the dog to "bark" on command by following each bark with praise. Once he will bark on command, add a "no" command. When he stops, praise him. Repeat this exercise until he understands both commands.
2. Get the dog's attention with a "shaker can." Put about 15 pennies in an empty can and tape it shut. Toss the can near (not at) the dog to startle him, or just shake it and put it on the floor to distract him.

3. Give the dog a "down/stay" command. Few dogs like the feel of their chest reverberating against the floor when they bark.
4. Reduce the dog's area of influence, possibly by kenneling. With less space to guard, he may be quieter.
5. Make sure territorial and social barkers have limited views. Treat windows with heavy drapes or a blanket to muffle both sight and sound.
6. If your dog runs the fence barking at other dogs or people on the other side, install a privacy fence that the dog cannot see through.
7. Provide "white noise." Many families have either a television or a radio playing whenever they are home, but turn it off when they leave. The silence can be deafening to a dog.
8. If the dog barks when you leave home, give him an "only-when-I'm-gone" toy with your scent on it. He'll soon learn that you will return when you give him this toy. (For instance, stuff a "Kong" with peanut butter and dog treats and FREEZE it.)
9. Establish a "five free barks" policy that lets your dog bark only five times before you give a no-bark command. This will satisfy his urge to bark but curtail nonstop woofing.
10. Be sure your dog has time for appropriate barking. Take him outside or engage him in play so he can get barking out of his system.

When all else fails....

It is always better to understand why your dog is barking and resolve whatever problem is causing your dog to bark; however, this is not always possible. If it is not possible, there are a number of devices on the market designed to help you get control of a dog's barking excessively:

Bark Collars: Bark collars are available in two styles. One uses citronella cartridges and the other a mild electronic stimulation. Both utilize automatic corrections as a result of the dog barking. Costs vary with style and maker. Neither should be left on a dog for longer than 24 hours at a time, especially the electronic one which can cause burns on a dog's neck and/or aggression if used incorrectly. Never use the electronic bark collar without first consulting a trainer experienced in its use.

Ultrasonic Devices: These come in a wand style and in a collar (not widely available.) The wand style is designed so that when your dog barks you point it at the dog and an electronic noise inaudible to humans is emitted out of the end of the device. In the collar style, a dog's bark causes the collar to emit the ultrasonic noise. With some dogs ultrasonics are highly effective; however, other dogs will totally ignore these devices.