

Common Dog Behavior Issues

Barking



Barking is one of many forms of vocal communication for dogs. People are often pleased that their dog barks, because it alerts them to the approach of people to their home or it tells them there's something that the dog wants or needs. However, sometimes a dog's barking can be excessive. Because barking serves a variety of functions, you must identify its cause and your dog's motivation for barking before you can treat a barking problem.

Each type of barking serves a distinct function for a dog, and if he's repeatedly rewarded for his barking—in other words, if it gets him what he wants—he can learn to use barking to his benefit. For example, dogs who successfully bark for attention often go on to bark for other things, like food, play and walks. For this reason, it's important to train your dog to be quiet on cue so that you can stop his attention-related barking and teach him to do another behavior instead—like sit or down—to get what he wants.

Many owners can identify why their dog is barking just by hearing the specific bark. For instance, a dog's bark sounds different when he wants to play as compared to when he wants to come in from the yard. If you want to reduce your dog's barking, it's crucial to determine why he's barking. It will take some time to teach your dog to bark less. Unfortunately, it's just not realistic to expect a quick fix or to expect that your dog will stop barking altogether. (Would you expect a person to suddenly stop talking altogether?) Your goal should be to decrease, rather than eliminate, the amount of barking. Bear in mind that some dogs are more prone to barking than others. In addition, some breeds are known as "barkers," and it can be harder to decrease barking in individuals of these breeds.

Why Dogs Bark

Territorial Barking

Dogs can bark excessively in response to people, dogs or other animals within or approaching their territories. Your dog's territory includes the area surrounding his home and, eventually, anywhere he has explored or associates strongly with you: your car, the route you take during walks and other places where he spends a lot of time.

Alarm Barking

If your dog barks at any and every noise and sight regardless of the context, he's probably alarm barking. Dogs engaged in alarm barking usually have stiffer body language than dogs barking to greet, and they often move or pounce forward an inch or two with each bark. Alarm barking is different than territorial barking in that a dog might alarm bark at sights or sounds in any location at all, not just when he's defending familiar areas, such as your house, yard or car.

Attention-Seeking Barking

Some dogs bark at people or other animals to gain attention or rewards, like food, toys or play.

Greeting Barking

Your dog might be barking in greeting if he barks when he sees people or other dogs and his body is relaxed, he's excited and his tail is wagging. Dogs who bark when greeting people or other animals might also whine.

Compulsive Barking

Some dogs bark excessively in a repetitive way, like a broken record. These dogs often move repetitively as well. For example, a dog who's compulsively barking might run back and forth along the fence in his yard or pace in his home.

Socially Facilitated Barking

Some dogs bark excessively only when they hear other dogs barking. This kind of barking occurs in the social context of hearing other dogs, even at a distance—such as dogs in the neighborhood.

Frustration-Induced Barking

Some dogs bark excessively only when they're placed in a frustrating situation, like when they can't access playmates or when they're confined or tied up so that their movement is restricted.

Other Problems That Can Cause Barking

Illness or Injury

Dogs sometimes bark in response to pain or a painful condition. Before attempting to resolve your dog's barking problem, please have your dog examined by a veterinarian to rule out medical causes.

Separation-Anxiety Barking

Excessive barking due to separation anxiety occurs only when a dog's caretaker is gone or when the dog is left alone. You'll usually see at least one other separation anxiety symptom as well, like pacing, destruction, elimination, depression or other signs of distress. For more information about this problem, please see our article,

[Separation Anxiety \(/pet-care/dog-care/common-dog-behavior-issues/separation-anxiety\)](/pet-care/dog-care/common-dog-behavior-issues/separation-anxiety).

What to Do About Your Dog's Excessive Barking

The first step toward reducing your dog's barking is to determine the type of bark your dog is expressing. The following questions can help you to accurately decide on which type of barking your dog is doing so that you can best address your dog's problem. Think about your answers to these questions as you read through the information below on the different types of barking and their treatments.

1. When and where does the barking occur?
2. Who or what is the target of the barking?
3. What things (objects, sounds, animals or people) trigger the barking?
4. Why is your dog barking?

If It's Territorial Barking or Alarm Barking

Territorial behavior is often motivated by both fear and anticipation of a perceived threat. Because defending territory is such a high priority to them, many dogs are highly motivated to bark when they detect the approach of unknown people or animals near familiar places, like their homes and yards. This high level of motivation means that when barking territorially, your dog might ignore unpleasant or punishing responses from you, such as scolding or yelling. Even if the barking itself is suppressed by punishment, your dog's motivation to guard his territory will remain strong, and he might attempt to control his territory in another way, such as biting without warning.

Dogs engage in territorial barking to alert others to the presence of visitors or to scare off intruders or both. A dog might bark when he sees or hears people coming to the door, the mail carrier delivering the mail and the maintenance person reading the gas meter. He might also react to the sights and sounds of people and dogs passing by your house or apartment. Some dogs get especially riled up when they're in the car and see people or dogs pass by. You should be able to judge from your dog's body posture and behavior whether he's barking to say "Welcome, come on in!" or "Hey, you'd better hit the road. You're not welcome at my place!" If you're dealing with a dog in the first category, follow the treatment outlined in this article for greeting barking (below). If you're dealing with a dog in the latter category who isn't friendly to people, you'll be more successful if you limit your dog's ability to see or hear passersby and teach him to associate the presence of strangers with good things, such as food and attention.

For treatment of territorial barking, your dog's motivation should be reduced as well as his opportunities to defend his territory. To manage your dog's behavior, you'll need to block his ability to see people and animals. Removable plastic film or spray-based glass coatings can help to obscure your dog's view of areas that he observes and guards from within your house. Use secure, opaque fencing to surround outside areas your dog has access to. Don't allow your dog to greet people at the

front door, at your front yard gate or at your property boundary line. Instead, train him to go to an alternate location, like a crate or a mat, and remain quiet until he's invited to greet appropriately.

Alarm barking is very similar to territorial barking in that it's triggered by sights and sounds. However, dogs who alarm bark might do so in response to things that startle or upset them when they're not on familiar turf. For example, a dog who barks territorially in response to the sight of strangers approaching will usually only do so when in his own home, yard or car. By contrast, a dog who habitually alarm barks might vocalize when he sees or hears strangers approaching in other places, too. Although territorial barking and alarm barking are a little different, the recommendations below apply to both problems.

"Quiet" Training

If your dog continues to alarm bark or bark territorially, despite your efforts to block his exposure to sights and sounds that might trigger his barking, try the following techniques:

- Teach your dog that when someone comes to the door or passes by your property, he's permitted to bark until you say "Quiet." Allow your dog to bark three to four times. Then say "Quiet." Avoid shouting. Just say the command clearly and calmly. Then go to your dog, gently hold his muzzle closed with your hand and repeat "Quiet." Release your dog's muzzle, step away, and call him away from the door or window. Then ask your dog to sit and give him a treat. If he stays beside you and remains quiet, continue to give him frequent treats for the next few minutes, until whatever triggered his barking is gone. If your dog resumes barking right away, repeat the sequence above. Do the same outside if he barks at passersby when he's in the yard.
- If you prefer not to hold your dog's muzzle or if doing so seems to scare your dog or make him struggle, you can try a different method. When your dog barks, approach him, calmly say "Quiet," and then prompt his silence by feeding him a steady stream of tiny, pea-sized treats, such as chicken, hot dogs or bits of cheese. After enough repetitions of this sequence, over several days or more of training, your dog will begin to understand what "Quiet" means. You'll know that he's catching on if he consistently stops barking as soon as he hears you say "Quiet." At this point, you can gradually extend the time between

the cue, "Quiet," and your dog's reward. For example, say "Quiet," wait 2 seconds, and then feed your dog several small treats in a row. Over many repetitions, gradually increase the time from 2 seconds to 5, then 10, then 20, and so on.

- If the "Quiet" procedure is ineffective after 10 to 20 attempts, then allow your dog to bark 3 to 4 times, calmly say "Quiet," and then immediately make a startling noise by shaking a set of keys or an empty soda can filled with pennies. If your dog is effectively startled by the sound, he'll stop barking. The instant he does, call him away from the door or window, ask him to sit, and give him a treat. If he stays beside you and remains quiet, continue to give him frequent treats for the next few minutes until whatever triggered his barking is gone. If he resumes barking right away, repeat the sequence. If this procedure doesn't work after 10 to 20 attempts, please see our article, [Finding Professional Behavior Help \(/finding-professional-help\)](/finding-professional-help), for information about finding a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist (CAAB or ACAAB), a board-certified veterinary behaviorist (Dip ACVB) or a Certified Professional Dog Trainer (CPDT) for guidance.
- If your dog barks at people or other dogs during walks, distract him with special treats, like chicken, cheese or hot dogs, before he begins to bark. (Soft, very tasty treats work best.) Show your dog the treats by holding them in front of his nose, and encourage him to nibble at them while he's walking past a person or dog who would normally cause him to bark. Some dogs do best if you ask them to sit as people or dogs pass. Other dogs prefer to keep moving. Make sure you praise and reward your dog with treats anytime he chooses not to bark.
- It may help to have your dog wear a head halter at times when he's likely to bark (for example, on walks or in your house). A halter can have a distracting or calming effect and make your dog less likely to bark. Make sure you reward him for not barking. (Important note: For safety reasons, only let your dog wear the halter when you can supervise him.)
- If your dog most often barks territorially in your yard, keep him in the house during the day and supervise him when he's in the yard so that he can't just bark his head off when no one's around. If he's sometimes able to engage in

excessive alarm barking (when you're not around, for example), that behavior will get stronger and harder to reduce.

- If your dog most often barks territorially in your car, teach him to ride in a crate while in the car. Riding in a crate will restrict your dog's view and reduce his motivation to bark. If crating your dog in your car isn't feasible, try having your dog wear a head halter in the car instead. (Important note: For safety reasons, only let your dog wear the halter when you can supervise him.)

"Go to Your Spot" Training

It also helps to teach your dog a specific set of behaviors to do when people come into your home so that he has fewer opportunities to alarm bark. Plus, when your dog performs his new behaviors and receives rewards, he'll learn that people coming into his and your space is a good thing.

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If you need help teaching your dog these skills, don't hesitate to enlist the help of a Certified Professional Dog Trainer or a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist in your area. A professional trainer can meet with you one-on-one to guide you through the process of teaching your dog to sit, stay and go to a spot on command. Please see our article, [Finding Professional Behavior Help \(/finding-professional-help\)](#), to locate one of these experts near you.

Greeting Barking

If your dog barks at people coming to the door, at people or dogs walking by your property, at people or dogs he sees on walks, and at people or dogs he sees through the fence, and his barking is accompanied by whining, tail wagging and other signs of friendliness, your dog is probably barking to say hello. He most likely barks the same way when family members come home.

- Keep greetings low key. Teach your dog to sit and stay when meeting people at the door so that he has something to do instead of barking. This will reduce his excitement level. First teach him to sit and stay when there aren't any people at the door so that he knows the behavior well before you ask him to do it with the distraction and excitement of real visitors arriving.
- If your dog likes toys, keep a favorite toy near the front door and encourage him to pick up the toy before he greets you or guests. If he learns to hold a toy

in his mouth, he'll be less inclined to bark. (He'll probably still whine, however).

- On walks, teach your dog that he can walk calmly past people and dogs without meeting them. To do this, distract your dog with special treats, like chicken, cheese or hot dogs, before he begins to bark. (Soft, very tasty treats work best). Show your dog the treats by holding them in front of his nose, and encourage him to nibble at them while he's walking past a person or dog who would normally cause him to bark. Some dogs do best if you ask them to sit as people or dogs pass. Other dogs prefer to keep moving. Make sure you praise and reward your dog with treats anytime he chooses not to bark.
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Attention-Seeking Barking

One reason that it's so easy to live with dogs is that they're very expressive. They find a way to let us know their needs. They often do this by barking or whining. Indeed, we find it desirable when they bark to ask to go outside to eliminate or to request that their water bowl be filled. It's less attractive, however, when your dog barks to demand anything and everything, needed or not! This pattern of barking does not happen by accident. A demanding, noisy dog has been taught to be this way, usually not on purpose! To get your dog to stop, you'll need to consistently not reward him for barking. Don't try to figure out exactly why he's barking. Ignore him instead. Treatment for this kind of barking can be tough because, most of the time, pet parents unwittingly reinforce the behavior—sometimes just with eye contact, touching, scolding or talking to their dogs. To dogs, all of these human behaviors can count as rewarding attention. Try to use crystal-clear body language to tell your dog that his attention-seeking barking is going to fail. For example, when your dog starts to bark for attention, you can stare at the ceiling, turn away from your dog or walk out of the room. The instant your dog stops barking, ask him to sit and then give him what he wants, whether that's attention, play, treats, to go outside or to come in.

To be successful, try your best to NEVER reward your dog for barking at you again! In some cases, it's easiest to teach your dog an alternative behavior. For instance, if

you don't want your dog to bark when he needs to go out or come in, get a doggy door installed or teach him to ring a bell hanging on a door by touching it with his nose or paw. If your dog barks to get you to play with him, teach him to bring a toy and sit in front of you. Sometimes, it's easier to avoid problems by eliminating the things that cause your dog to bark. If your dog barks to ask you to retrieve his toys from under the sofa, block the space so that the toys don't get stuck beyond his reach. If your dog barks at you when you're talking on the telephone or working on the computer, give him a tasty chew bone to occupy him before he starts to bark.

You can also teach your dog to be silent on command. This will help strengthen the association between quiet behavior and attention or rewards. Your dog should always be quiet before receiving attention, play or treats. By giving your dog a guaranteed method of getting attention, he's no longer forced to bark for attention. Regularly seek your dog out to give him attention—sweet praise, petting and an occasional treat—when he's not barking.

Compulsive Barking

Dogs occasionally become compulsive barkers, meaning they bark in situations that aren't considered normal or they bark in a repetitive, fixed or rigid way. If your dog barks repeatedly for long periods of time, apparently at nothing or at things that wouldn't bother other dogs, such as shadows, light flashes, mirrors, open doors, the sky, etc., you may have a compulsive barker. If your dog also does other repetitive behaviors like spinning, circling or jumping while barking, he may be a compulsive barker. To help reduce compulsive barking, you can try changing how you confine your dog. For instance, if your dog is tied or tethered, you can switch to keeping him loose in a safe fenced area, or if he's left alone for long periods of time, you should increase exercise, mental stimulation and social contact.

If you suspect that your dog is a compulsive barker, we recommend that you seek guidance from a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist or a veterinary behaviorist. If you can't find a behaviorist, you can seek help from a Certified Professional Dog Trainer, but be sure that the trainer is qualified to help you. Determine whether she or he has education and experience treating compulsive behavior, since this kind of expertise isn't required for CPDT certification. Please see our article, [Finding Professional Behavior Help \(/finding-professional-help\)](#), to locate one of these behavior experts in your area.

Socially Facilitated Barking

Dogs are social animals, so it's natural for them to bark when they hear others barking. You can discourage this tendency by keeping your dog indoors when other dogs are barking, by playing music to drown out the sound of other dogs, and by distracting your dog with treats or play when other dogs bark (whether it's in real life or on TV).

Excitement or Frustration Barking

Dogs often bark when they find themselves excited but thwarted, or frustrated, from getting to something they want. For example, a frustrated dog might bark in his yard because he wants to get out and play with children he hears in the street. A frustrated dog might bark and run the fence line with the dog next door, or bark by the patio door while watching a cat or squirrel frolicking in his yard. Some dogs bark at other dogs on walks because they want to greet and play, or they bark at their caretakers to get them to move faster when preparing to go for walks. The most effective means for discouraging excitement or frustration barking is to teach a frustrated dog to control his impulses through obedience training. You can teach your dog to wait, sit and stay before gaining access to fun activities like walks, playing with other dogs or chasing squirrels. This can be a daunting task, so you may need the assistance of a Certified Professional Dog Trainer to help you. Please see our article, [Finding Professional Behavior Help \(/finding-professional-help\)](#), for information about finding a CPDT in your area. You can also discourage the presence of cats and other animals in your yard by using motion-activated devices to startle intruders.

Anti-Bark Collars

A variety of devices are designed to teach dogs to curtail barking. Most often, these are collars that deliver an unpleasant stimulus when your dog barks. The stimulus might be a loud noise, an ultrasonic noise, a spray of citronella mist or a brief electric shock. The collars that deliver noise are ineffective with most dogs. One study found that the citronella collar was at least as effective for eliminating barking as the electronic collar and was viewed more positively by owners. Virtually all dogs become "collar-wise," meaning that they learn not to bark while wearing their anti-bark collars but revert to barking when they're not wearing them. Collars that work on a microphone system to pick up the sound of a dog's bark should not be used in a multidog home because any dog's bark can activate the collar.

Anti-bark collars are punishment devices and are not recommended as a first choice for dealing with a barking problem. This is especially true for barking that's motivated by fear, anxiety or compulsion. Before using an anti-bark collar, please see our article, [Finding Professional Behavior Help \(/finding-professional-help\)](/finding-professional-help), for information about finding a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist, a board-certified veterinary behaviorist or a qualified Certified Professional Dog Trainer for guidance.

What NOT to Do

- Do not encourage your dog to bark at sounds, such as pedestrians or dogs passing by your home, birds outside the window, children playing in the street and car doors slamming, by saying "Who's there?" or getting up and looking out the windows.
- Do not punish your dog for barking at certain sounds, like car doors slamming and kids playing in the street, but then encourage him to bark at other sounds, like people at the door. You must be consistent!
- Unless a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist or veterinary behaviorist advises you to do otherwise, never use punishment procedures if your dog is barking out of fear or anxiety. This could make him feel worse and, as a result, his barking might increase.
- Never use a muzzle to keep your dog quiet for long periods of time or when you're not actively supervising him. Dogs can't eat, drink or pant to cool themselves while wearing muzzles, so making your dog wear one for long periods of time would be inhumane.
- Never tie your dog's muzzle closed with rope, cord, rubber bands or anything else. Doing this is dangerous, painful and inhumane.



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