



SAN TAN CANINE TRAINING NEWSLETTER

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Dog Talk

Dogs bark in many different situations and to express many different emotional states, including fear, distress, desire, and joy.

Dogs have many ways of communicating with one another and with us. Growls, whines, and howls convey a range of meanings from one dog to another. But the bark – the most common canine utterance – seems to be directed mainly to humans. Most experts suspect canines do not communicate with each other by barking because wolves and coyotes bark only in stressful situations.

Nevertheless, most dogs have a hard-wired barking instinct. And they do use it. Some surmise that early breeders selected specifically for alarm barking. Others believe ancient people bred dogs for tameness – and barking came along with the genetic package. Regardless of how it evolved, barking is often tricky for humans to interpret because dogs bark in many situations and emotional state, including fear, distress, desire, and joy.

DIFFERENT KINDS OF BARKING

Spontaneous Barking

Many dogs bark spontaneously when stressed or stimulated. Some, for example, emit a low-pitched warning or a higher-pitched welcome when “aliens” tread on their turf. Then, of course, there’s the invitational “let’s play!” bark and the call-and-response “barkathon,” where one barker sets off a chain of barking.

Learned Barking

Whether they intend to or not, owners often encourage barking. If you reward your dog’s vocal response to a “speak” command with treats, for example, he or she soon will associate barking with tasty tidbits and will bark repetitively to get them. (Who’s training whom?)

Similarly, if your dog’s insistent “let me in” bark prompts you to open the door, the dog will learn that barking loudly and long enough will get results. Surprisingly, yelling “be quiet” at a barking dog many actually reinforce barking behavior. “For many dogs, any attention is rewarding – even reprimands. Just as one barking dog incites others to chime in, one “barking” human can also encourage dogs to vocalize too much.

Sometimes, innocent bystanders reinforce barking you’re your dog barks at the letter carrier, who then leaves after dropping off the mail, the dog probably figures he or she has done a good job of scaring off an intruder.

If you’ve inadvertently taught your dog to bark too much, you’ll have to modify your behavior. Don’t do anything that the dog could perceive as encouragement for barking. In fact, make sure you reward your dog for not barking or for stopping on command.

Home-Along Barking

Alas, some dogs bark simply because there’s nothing else to do. Repetitive, monotonous barking is often a response to isolation.

Separation anxiety can also trigger excessive barking. Some dogs are so overcome with anxiety when their owners leave that barking helps relieve the stress. There are a few things you can do to help a dog with separation anxiety. Train your dog to keep quiet by providing vigorous exercise before you leave for any extended period and gradually lengthening the periods of separation.

Bred to Bark

Beagles and several terrier breeds top the “Barker List.” Fox hunters selectively bred beagles to bark as they led the way to the fox. And the bygone profession of terriers was to alert hunters to the location of rodent burrows, which carries over today in the insistent barking of many terriers.



Bothersome Barkers

While dog owners usually don't mind some barking, excessive barking is a nuisance. Owner definitions of "acceptable" barking vary according to their living situation and their neighbors' noise tolerance. In general, "if a dog won't stop barking when you tell it to, you have a problem.

Because barking is innately programmed behavior and excessive barking can become so entrenched, modifying the behavior requires patience and persistence. The first step is to identify what incites your dog's vocalization. You can then usually silence the dig by eliminating or modifying the stimulus. If you want your dog to bark in certain situations, you should aim to control barking, not eliminate it. (Reward your dog when he or she vocalized appropriately so the dog learns when it's okay to bark.)

If your canine is a chronic barker out of doors, try bringing it inside. Many dogs can stay indoors for most of a twenty-four-hour cycle, barring the occasional outside excursion. If your dog has been banished outdoors because of indiscretions such as house soiling, first you" have to address the original behavior problem.

NIP BARKING IN THE BUD

You can forestall excessive barking in several ways. First, when selecting a breed, consider the typically nonreactive, low-volume breeds such as bulldogs or Old English sheepdogs. Second, never reward your dog for any unwanted vocalization. Finally, be sure to meet your dog's needs for exercise and mental stimulation. Physically and mentally tired dogs are less likely to bark.

Unearth the Cause

If you try to solve problem barking but overlook what sets it off, your dog may become silent but may exhibit through other coping mechanisms like destructive chewing or digging.

Sitting Silently

Treating chronic barking can be easier if you and your dog have a handle on basic obedience. If you're present when the dog is barking inappropriately, command a sit-stay. (Enforced mental concentration often distracts dogs from barking.) Once the dog is sitting, give a quiet but firm "cease" or "enough" command. After several seconds of silence, praise the dog calmly – not effusively.

You'll need to retrain your dog if he or she erupts into incessant barking at the mere sound of a knock or doorbell. Start by having an accomplice ring the doorbell or knock. Let your dog bark twice or thrice as a reward for alerting you. Then give a "quiet" or "cease" command and praise the dog for quieting down before you open the door and greet your visitor. If your dog stays silent, let your friend reward the dog with a food treat.

PROBLEMS WITH PUNISHMENT

Punishment is a consequence of undesirable behavior that is meant to decrease the behavior's frequency. Properly selected and applied, punishment such as an unpleasant but harmless noise can help temporarily curb barking. It does, however, have drawbacks.

Punishment rarely addresses the underlying cause of the barking, and it needs to be applied consistently to work well. If a dog does not receive a correction for each and every barking episode, these unpunished incidents will reinforce barking in general.

In the final analysis, most animal behaviorists recommend punishment for excessive barking only as an adjunct to other techniques. And for certain behavior problems such as fears and phobias, punishment is definitely counterproductive.



Bulldog



Old English Sheepdog

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