

All Bark, No Bite



What's all the Barking About?

Dog's bark. It's what they do. They bark to get your attention. They bark because they've heard something and want to let you and, apparently, everyone else know. They also bark to guard their houses and fenced yards. Some dogs, (not unlike people) bark just to hear the sound of their own voices. And, even though there are many different reasons why dogs bark, excessive barking can become quite problematic, and must be stopped. So what can we do to address it? Read on and find out.

In our homes an excessively barking dog can function much like double-edged sword. Most of us want a dog that will bark if it hears something troubling. Moreover, we like the idea that our dog is able to alert us to a possible intruder;

and with a modicum of barking, tell that intruder to move along. Most types of barking are generally acceptable assuming the dog is able to stop after one or two barks, whether it does so voluntarily or when you ask it to. The greater problem ensues when the barking becomes an unstoppable pattern of repetitive behavior that cannot be interrupted.

This is what often happens as a result of the doorbell ringing or a simple knock at the door. It's one of the most common complaints about barking: "The dog barks uncontrollably when someone comes to the door and I can't stop it."

Pavlov's Other Dog

Many of you realize that the dog is performing according to the laws of behavior – well defined by Pavlov in the form of classical conditioning. Classical condition is "conditioning by association." In this case, a bell rings and the dog makes an association based on prior experience that the bell means something significant is going to happen – something worth barking about. The bell signals to the dog that someone is coming. In most cases, this makes the dog very happy and it barks to signal excitement or some similar emotion. "Hey, I smell Harry from next door! Isn't that great! He always pets me and I love him!" Or, if the dog is of a guarding nature or fearful, she barks to tell you she is concerned or afraid. In either case, once the behavior begins it is almost impossible to control. Now every time the doorbell rings or the knocking starts, the dog automatically barks and continues to bark, even when the perceived danger is gone.

And, for those with multiple dogs, it's that much worse; it becomes an overwhelming cacophony of unpleasant sound – where each dog feeds on the other's behavior until the focus changes or the cause subsides. This type of behavior is not only upsetting to your immediate household it can create havoc with your next-door neighbors. If you live in an apartment building the noise is heard by those upstairs, downstairs and on either side. Yikes!

Stop the madness, PLEASE!

How do you stop the incessant barking? There are several ways to address uncontrollable barking. The first and most important step is to pull the dog's attention away from the things that typically stimulate the barking. In doing so you are de-sensitizing the dog to the knock or the doorbell or, in some cases, both.

To start, it's important to do this with a hungry, food motivated dog and to use a food treat that will make an impression – something soft, small and

very tasty. I recommend something soft, so it will go down quickly and be certain to reward the dog the second he is quiet, and so the dog will not become distracted by the crunching of a biscuit or hard treat. Remember, the attention span of a dog is very short.

Plant someone at the door and have them ring or knock or both. The second the dog starts to bark attempt to interrupt the barking with an unpleasant vocal sound, like a loud buzzer similar to the one we used to hear on "The Weakest Link" television show. As soon as the barking stops, quickly pop a treat in your dog's mouth with a very happy "good dog" or similar verbal praise.

This must be done over and over and over until you can't imagine doing it again. Then do it another ten or fifteen times. In order to change deeply ingrained behavior, you have

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to reward the preferred behavior more than the number of times the dog has displayed the unwanted one. Do not be discouraged by this fact, just know how important it is to get as many successes as possible. And most of all—know that you must consistently reward your dog with the thing that he or she values most—typically, a food treat coupled together with an exuberant verbal praise.

If you have multiple dogs, you may employ another technique whereby you use the same stimulus (the ringing bell or knocking at the door) and use the same verbal interruption. The first dog to stop barking gets the treat. This technique works especially well if the dogs are closely bonded and barking as a close-knit unit. By using one dog's behavior to bait the others you are using a healthy motivational device to encourage them to be quiet together.

If none of this works, you can try a "no-bark" type of collar. I have found the ones that deliver a water or citronella spray are quite ineffective, after a period of time. Some dogs find the water spray fun and may even get used to the smell of citronella. Instead of discouraging the barking, it often results in a game they find rewarding, doing nothing but making the behavior worse.

I would be remiss not to talk about the use of the "e-collars"—or the electronic version of the "no-bark" collars. The use of these tools is widely debated among dog trainers and behaviorists, and, many eschew any device they deem "aversive," or that delivers any kind of electrical stimulation. I have found several that are extremely gentle and work to great effect. These are collars that can be set to deliver a vibration similar in feel to your cell phone. Or, they can be set to deliver the vibration first and then, if the dog barks again within a certain timeframe, a very gentle stimulation occurs that feels like a tingle. It's best to buy these from a trainer who understands how to use them and can provide training to you. Any device can be misused and can become hurtful to the dog.

No matter what tool you use, it is still important to reward the dog for being quiet when faced with the stimulus that causes it to bark. Remember, dogs were bred to bark—it's what they do. It's up to you to tell the dog he or she has a choice to behave differently and by choosing to be quiet you will both be greatly rewarded. 🐾

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