

Dog: Barking



Why Dogs Bark

Dogs bark for a variety of reasons, and it is a form of normal communication:

- **Alert barking** springs from territoriality, barrier frustration, or a combination of the two.
- **Attention-seeking barking** is your dog's way of communicating that he would like something (attention, play, or food) right now. Typical requests are "open the door now," "pay attention to me now," "let me out of here now," "I want to meet that dog now," etc.
- **Fear/alarm barking** occurs when your dog is uncomfortable about something in the environment and barks to say "I'm scared! Don't come any closer!"
- **Loneliness/boredom barking** happens when your dog's daily needs for companionship, exercise, and social stimulation are not met. In a sense, the dog has become sad due to boredom.
- **Anxious barking** can be a symptom of separation-related problems.

How to Deal with Barking

First, you need to know why your dog is barking. What is his motivation? If in doubt, consult a professional. We have a referral list on our website: <http://www.sfspca.org/resources/library/for-dog-owners/dog-trainers-walkers>.

Once you know why your dog is barking, there are two strategies you can use to deal with the problem—and often the most effective solution is a combination of the two:

- **Manage.** Prevent the situation that triggers barking in the first place or prevent your dog's access to the trigger. At the same time, increase your dog's activity level and/or social interactions. Tired dogs that have had plenty of companionship throughout the day are far less likely to bark.
- **Train.** Teach your dog a mutually exclusive behavior, for example to be quiet on command.

Alert Barking

Manage: If your dog barks at doorbells or people passing by outside, limit your dog's access to parts of the house that face sidewalks or streets or to the area where the front door is. If your dog barks at other dogs while on leash, avoid areas with many dogs and be sure to reward good walking manners. You can often reduce the severity of your dog's alert barking by boosting the amount of exercise and stimulation he gets. Invite people and dogs over to socialize and expose him to a wider range of sights and sounds. Also, if your dog barks at the smallest sounds and changes in the environment, try taking him out more.

Train: For barking at doorbells, the standby training technique is to teach your dog a mutually exclusive behavior, such as fetching a certain toy or doing a Down-Stay on a mat for tasty food rewards. See our handout *Down Command*. Another technique—more effort but great results—is to teach your dog to be quiet on command. See our *Front Door Quiet Command* handout.

To train your dog not to bark at other dogs while on leash, consult a trainer for a behavior modification program and/or attend one of our Reactive Rover classes.

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Attention-Seeking Barking

Manage: More exercise, more playtime, and plenty of social interactions can reduce attention-seeking barking. But the best cure is to *not* teach your dog that barking gets him what he wants.

Train: If you don't like barking, stop rewarding it with attention, door-opening and ball-throwing services, releasing from crates, etc. Period. No buts. Rather than your dog telling you when to take him out, take him out at regular intervals, and make sure none are preceded by barking. Don't let a barking dog out of a crate until he's quiet. Ignore dogs who bark at you. Keep in mind that if you have been rewarding barking for a while, it will get worse before it gets better. You're changing the rules and your dog will be frustrated at first.

Above all, start paying attention to your dog when he's quiet. Teach him that there are payoffs for lying quietly, chewing on a chew-toy, and refraining from barking.

Fear/Alarm Barking

Barking at people or objects can mean several things. Your dog may be uncomfortable with strangers—or with a subset of people he didn't encounter often enough as a puppy (people wearing hats, for example). He might be deeply suspicious of buses or lawn mowers. In such cases, it's important to get at the underlying under-socialization.

First, though, rule out that your dog is barking at people simply because he's excited to meet them. If that is the case, manage him by giving him a stick or a ball to carry around, or train him to be quiet on command.

Train: To reduce fear/alarm barking, you must teach your dog to associate the alarming thing with food. Bring yummy treats on walks and keep enough distance from the scary thing that your dog will eat the treats while passing it, and then work to gradually reduce the distance. If your dog doesn't like strangers, meals need to be fed bit by bit around strangers until he improves. It takes a while to re-socialize an adult dog, so stick with it.

Manage: Avoid the barking trigger(s). Choose quiet streets or open spaces for your dog's exercise. Set up your dog's confinement/safe area in a part of the house away from visitors.

Loneliness/Boredom Barking

Manage: There is no quick fix or training solution here. You must meet your dog's basic needs for stimulation, exercise, and companionship. If you have an outside dog, make him an inside dog. If you can, arrange for your dog to be with you or a friend during the day. Alternatively, hire a dog walker or enroll your dog in a doggie daycare.

Anxious Barking

If your dog barks and whines when left alone and you have established the reason is anxiety (see below), he may be suffering from separation anxiety and will need formal desensitization and/or medication. Contact our veterinary behavior specialist. For more information, read our handout *Separation-Related Problems*.

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ABOUT BARKING WHEN ALONE

Dogs bark when alone for a number of reasons. It can be a form of attention-seeking barking, alert barking, loneliness/boredom barking, or anxiety barking related to separation from you.

Again, the key to resolving the problem is figuring out your dog's motivation for barking. Don't guess and risk getting it wrong. Instead, set up a video camera or webcam so you can record and watch your dog's behavior.

ABOUT BARK CONTROL COLLARS

Anti-bark collars are remote punishment tools that deliver an unpleasant stimulus when your dog barks, such as a loud noise, an ultrasonic noise, a spray of citronella mist, or an electric shock.

Because barking is a natural means of expression for dogs and not something to punish them for, we recommend using training and management techniques to reduce excessive barking. That's also preferable because many dogs simply learn not to bark when wearing the anti-bark collar, but go right back to barking once it comes off.

If you opt to use an anti-bark collar, however, the best options are:

Citronella anti-bark dog collars

Ultrasonic collars that *don't* use electric shocks

Note: Never use shock collars or any other type of collar that inflicts pain on your dog. It's inhumane, can permanently disfigure or harm your dog, and may lead to aggression.