



Sussex North & Brighton Branch
Registered Charity No.206630

BARKING

Barking is a completely normal part of canine communication. However, different breeds and individuals might bark more than others. It may not always feel like it to us humans, because we might just not understand why our dog is barking, but every dog barks for a reason. Whenever barking is successful in bringing about what the dog wanted to happen, the dog learns that barking was a good choice. The next time the dog is in a similar situation they will be more likely to bark again. Despite it being a normal behaviour, if barking becomes frequent or prolonged it can be as much a problem for the dog as it is for owners, so it is important to act early to help prevent normal barking from developing to a worrying stage.

Why is my dog barking?

The key to reducing and even preventing barking is to understand why the dog is barking in the first place, so we can learn what the dog hopes to gain from barking and teach them that they can obtain this by behaving in a different, more appropriate manner instead. We might also be able to make changes to the environment so that our dog no longer feels the need to bark. Broadly speaking, dogs will bark either to get something that they feel is good to happen, or in an attempt to prevent something they feel is bad from happening.

BARKING TO GET SOMETHING GOOD TO HAPPEN:

Company

Dogs are very social animals, however, most owners have commitments that mean their dogs might need to be left at home alone at times. Unless a dog has been taught how to be relaxed all by themselves, this can be scary or frustrating. Dogs that are distressed about being left home alone may howl or bark in an attempt to regain contact with their owners. If owners return home when their dogs are barking, this might make the dog feel that barking was a good thing to do, because it worked to bring the owner home, so they may

try it again next time they're on their own. Simply ignoring a dog who is barking when left alone and waiting for them to stop before returning will not stop them barking, because it doesn't change the way they feel about being on their own. Our handouts on separation anxiety and enrichment, give useful advice on how to teach your dog to entertain themselves and relax by themselves. However, a dog who barks in order to be reunited with their owner, or to gain any form of company, might well need some help from a professionally qualified behaviourist.

Attention

Most dogs enjoy having our attention, whether that's just us looking at and talking to them, or interacting with them, giving them a fuss or playing with them. Dogs can easily learn that barking can be a great way of getting our attention, and quickly too. Some dogs even find owners telling them to "be quiet" rewarding, because they enjoy being looked at and spoken to, and of course they don't understand what we're saying anyway!

Food

Some dogs may learn to bark at their mealtimes, usually when their food is being prepared. Because this always happens just before they get to eat, excited dogs might bark in anticipation and if their food is given to them when they're barking, they are more likely to bark again next time because they have connected their barking with their food arriving.

Play

Just as some dogs get very excited around food, others can't get enough of playtime! Many dogs bark when they are feeling excited or playful, and if barking works to get them a fun game then they may learn to continue barking every time they want us to play with them!

BARKING TO PREVENT SOMETHING BAD FROM HAPPENING:

Barking due to fear

Just like humans, dogs can be scared of lots of things. When a dog is frightened about something and feels under threat, whether the threat is real or not, it certainly feels real from the dog's perspective, then they might bark at whatever is scaring them, in an

attempt to make it go away. If barking is successful in making whatever is scary go away, then a dog will learn to bark again next time they want to feel safe. Consider the post-person coming up the garden path to their front door and pushing letters through the door. Remember the dog doesn't know what these are, so some dogs might find this very frightening, and if they started barking as the post-person arrived at the front door, they might very quickly connect their barking with the post-person turning and walking away again, and no more letters coming through the door. Next day, the barking magically makes the post-person go away again and the day after too! Now the dog knows exactly what to do whenever they feel scared, just bark and make the scary thing go away, so they can go back to feeling safe again. Barking certainly seems to be the best thing to do, as the poor dog has no way of understanding that the post-person was going to go away again anyway. Dogs who are worried about something in the environment might also bark to 'tell us' or others that this 'thing' is present because they want and need us to take action to help them feel safe. It could be something they've seen, heard, felt or smelt and something that we might not be aware of at all. We might have no idea what they are barking at, but we do know that dogs always have a reason for barking, as it is an important part of normal dog communication. The more a dog keeps themselves feeling safe by barking, the more they will bark whenever they're worried. This is why it's important to make sure puppies are taught to be confident and calm, even in unusual and unexpected situations.

WHAT TO DO TO HELP THE BARKING:

Find out why

The first thing to do is to find out why your dog is barking, and ask what they hope the barking will achieve. It is always important to find out how our dogs are feeling when they are behaving in a way that we would prefer they didn't, because this will help us help them to make better choices over how to behave in this situation in the future.

It's always best to ask your vet about problems or changes with your dog's behaviour, as there could be medical influences. If necessary, your vet will also be able to refer you to a qualified behaviourist who can give you personalised support and guidance.

Make sure you are not rewarding attention seeking

Make sure that your dog doesn't find barking rewarding and reward them for staying quiet instead. For example, if the dog barks at mealtimes simply ignore the barking and wait for it to stop before feeding. Similarly, if your dog barks at you in an attempt to get you to play with them then try hard to ignore this, or even leave the room and do something else instead. When your dog is quiet, then pick up a toy and invite them to play. The fun game that follows, will be an excellent reward for quietness.

Teach your dog to do something else instead and reward that

Rewards should be appropriate for the atmosphere you're trying to create, so if your dog has run straight to you excitedly when you've called them then a fun game would be an enjoyable reward. If you want to reward your dog for being quiet and relaxed, then keep your praise calm and gentle. Gently stroking them or just looking at and talking to them can be thoroughly rewarding, however, for some dogs this might be too exciting, so think about how your dog responds to your attention before you give it and think about what they are doing whenever you give them attention, in case you are accidentally rewarding them for something. If your dog is barking for something very specific, such as getting attention from another person, or to make another dog go away, then it is useful to teach them that doing something quieter and safer instead will get them the same result. This might even be something that means they can't bark at the same time, for example dogs can't bark and sniff at the same time, so teaching a dog to put their nose to the floor and sniff out tasty treats to eat and putting it on a cue such as "find it", instead of barking at another dog or person can be useful.

There's no need to tell your dog off

Although it can be very frustrating, especially if you have neighbours to consider, telling your dog off might also make them anxious, or confused about you, because sometimes you're friendly and fun but now you're loud and angry. This could even contribute to the problem, encouraging them to bark even more. It can also add energy to the situation and so escalate the situation and if the barking is for attention, telling them off is indeed attention, albeit negative attention, which may be accidentally rewarding the barking and so encouraging it.

Avoid the scary situation if your dog is barking because they're worried

If your dog is barking because they are scared, try to avoid the scary thing as much as possible and help prevent your dog being in this scary position again. For example, if your dog barks at passers-by through a window, cover this up to block their view. If they bark because they are scared of being alone, try to avoid leaving them as much as possible by considering a pet sitter or dog-walker.

Scared dogs might need further support from a behaviourist to find out exactly what it is they are scared of, in order to help them change the way they feel and learn to not only feel differently, but behave differently too.

Make sure your dog has lots to do and think about

Dogs might be more likely to bark if they are not getting enough mental or physical exercise, so make sure that you spend quality time keeping your dog engaged and active each day. Our handout on "Canine Enrichment" has lots of useful ideas for providing your dog with appropriate activity to prevent boredom and to use their bodies and minds.

Be prepared

Be aware that if in the past you would normally have responded to your dog's barking by interacting with them and trying to get them to stop, then once you start ignoring them for barking they are likely to bark even more to begin with! This is because they might become confused when you don't react as they are expecting you to, based on their past experiences, and so they might feel they need to try even harder and bark with more intensity in order to get you to behave as you used to! Don't worry if this happens, be calm and quiet and wait for the moment they stop and be ready to reward this moment of quietness with praise and attention. They need to learn that it is quietness that brings them the reward they want, so you should find that over time they become quiet much more quickly, as long as you are consistent and make sure you reward them when they're quiet. It is worth talking to your neighbours to let them know what you are doing and prepare them for the barking to get worse before it gets better, they'll hopefully thank you in the long run. Try to be consistent, as giving in and responding to their barking, even if it is just the once, is likely to teach them to persist and try even harder.

Extra help

If you are struggling please get in touch with a qualified behaviourist. These can found by copying and pasting the following link into your web browser:

<https://www.rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/pets/general/findabehaviourist>