Barking

Barking is a completely normal part of canine communication. However, if your dog is barking frequently or for long periods of time, it can be as much a problem for your dog as it is for you, or your neighbours! It's important to act early to help prevent your dog's barking from developing into something more serious.

Why do dogs bark?

Broadly speaking, dogs either bark in an attempt to get something they feel is good to happen, or in an attempt to prevent something they feel is bad from happening.

Whenever barking is successful in bringing about exactly 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.

Let's explore these reasons in a bit more detail below.

To get something good to happen

Most dogs enjoy our **attention**, and dogs can learn that barking is a great way of getting it! Some dogs may even find owners telling them to be quiet rewarding, because they enjoy being looked at and spoken to.

Other dogs may learn to bark at their mealtimes, usually when their **food** is being prepared. They can feel excited and bark in anticipation. If their food is given to them when they're barking, they're likely to bark again next time because they have connected their barking with their food arriving!

Just as some dogs get excited around food, others can't get enough of **playtime**. Many dogs bark when they are feeling excited or playful. If barking results in a fun game, they may learn to bark every time they want us to play with them.



To prevent something bad from happening

When a dog is frightened about something and feels under threat, whether the threat is real or not, they might bark at whatever is scaring them to attempt to make it go away. If barking is successful in making the scary thing go away, a dog might learn to bark again next time they want to feel safe.

Dogs who are worried about something nearby might also bark to 'tell us' that this 'thing' is present, because they 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.

The more a dog keeps themselves feeling safe by barking, the more likely they'll bark whenever they're worried.

Our handouts on **Building Confidence, Noise Fears** and **Reactive Dogs** offer advice on helping dogs to feel less worried within their environment.

Barking when left alone

Teaching dogs to relax when left alone is a vital step in reducing barking when you're not around. Our handout on **Coping Alone** offers advice on how to do this.

Dogs that are distressed about being left alone may howl or bark. This could be when you go out, or even when you're in a different room or out of sight at home.

Simply ignoring your dog's 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.

If your dog shows signs of distress when separated, then please contact your vet who can make sure they're in good health. They can then refer you to a qualified behaviourist for support.

For advice on sourcing a behaviourist please visit:
dogstrust.org.uk/help-advice/behaviour/finding-behaviour-and-training-support



Supporting your dog

The key to reducing and even preventing barking is to understand why your dog is barking in the first place. When you learn what your dog hopes to gain from barking, you can show them that they can get what they want by behaving in a calmer, quieter way. You may also be able to make changes to your dog's living space, so they no longer feel the need to bark.

Avoid telling your dog off

Although your dog's barking may be frustrating, telling them off could make them anxious or confused about you. This might make things worse; encouraging them to bark even more in worry or confusion. Some dogs might even see you shouting as you joining in and making noise with them.

Avoid things your dog barks at

If possible, try to avoid putting your dog in situations where they feel they need to bark. For example, if your dog barks at passers-by through a window, cover this up to block their view.

If your dog barks because they're scared of being on their own, try to avoid leaving them as much as possible, until you can teach them it's okay to be left alone. Consider using a pet sitter or dog-walker in the meantime.

Worried dogs might need support from a behaviourist to find out exactly what they're scared of and to help them change the way they feel.

Teach your dog calmer ways of telling you what they want

If your dog is barking for something specific, like to make another dog go away, it's useful to teach them that doing something quieter and safer will get them the same result.

For example, your dog can't bark and sniff at the same time. So, diverting their attention to the floor to sniff out tasty treats instead of barking can be very effective. Doing this consistently will teach your dog that quietly ignoring something, rather than barking, has a good outcome.

Provide physical and mental exercise

Your dog may be more likely to bark if they're bored and not getting enough mental or physical exercise. Make sure you spend quality time keeping your dog engaged and active each day.

Our handout on **Enrichment** has lots of ideas for providing your dog with appropriate activities to prevent boredom.

Make sure your dog doesn't find barking rewarding

Consistently reward them for quiet and calm behaviours instead.

If your dog barks at mealtimes, plan ahead and distract them by giving them an enjoyable activity to do when you know you'll be preparing them a snack. Be proactive in distracting them from what you're doing so that they're less likely to bark.

If they do bark, distract your dog without giving them direct attention (e.g. open a cupboard door or rummage somewhere that might just interrupt them briefly). Then, only when they are quiet, give your dog what they want.

Contacts for further support

We provide lifelong telephone-based behavioural support for all our adopted dogs. If you need help for your **Dogs Trust dog** please email:
postadoptionsupport@dogstrust.org.uk

Everyone else can access support by emailing our training and behaviour helpline:
behavioursupportline@dogstrust.org.uk

Your nearest Dog School Team are also happy to help and can be contacted via:
dogstrustdogschool.org.uk

The advice contained in this handout is of a general nature and is no substitute for specific behavioural or veterinary advice. If you are worried about your dog, then do consult your vet.

A dog is for life ®
Dogs Trust is a charity registered in England and Wales (1167663), and in Scotland (SC053144), and a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales (09365971).

© Dogstrust 2024
dogstrust.org.uk