

## Positive Training Solutions for the Top 5 Causes of Excessive Barking

Barking in domestic dogs is one type of vocal communication. Dogs bark in a variety of different contexts because the behavior serves a diversity of functions for the dog. Barking may be used to greet family members, warn unfamiliar individuals away, communicate a need to go outdoors and desire to play, or even indicate boredom. Barking in and of itself is not abnormal behavior; it is a natural expression of communication. Effective treatment of excessive barking necessitates identifying the cause or motivation for your dog's barking and designing a realistic training plan to reduce (not eliminate) barking.

Here are some of the most common motivations for excessive barking and steps for resolution.

### **1. Territorial barking / defending location**

Your dog may bark when unfamiliar people or animals approach or enter locations in which he spends significant time, including your yard, house, and even your car. Barking functions to inform other family members of the visitor's presence and communicates to the unfamiliar individual his presence is known.

#### **MANAGE THE ENVIRONMENT.**

Reducing territorial barking may be as simple as managing visual access to passersby. If your dog can easily access windows, doors, or porches to monitor outdoor events, limit his access to these areas with curtains, blinds, or baby gates. Storm or sliding glass doors and windows can be covered with removable decorative window film.

#### **TEACH YOUR DOG "QUIET" ON CUE.**

Train "quiet" out of context of the problem scenario before using it in a real-life barking setting. Pick a sound that generally elicits barking such as your doorbell or a knock on the door. Sound the doorbell or knock to prompt your dog to bark. After a bark or two, cue "quiet" and prompt

his being quiet by feeding several treats. After several repetitions, you will begin to notice him turn toward you when you cue “quiet.” At this stage, you can shift from steady feeding to click/treating after a second or two of silence.

#### **TRAIN A BEHAVIOR INCOMPATIBLE WITH BARKING.**

In training sessions out of context of the problematic barking scenario, teach your dog to pick up and bring you a specific toy. In early stages, click and treat for any interaction with the specified toy and progress to click/treat for picking up the toy and holding the toy for a few seconds at a time. Once the behavior is established and your dog is having a great time engaging in the game, it’s time to add a cue. In your next attempt, verbally cue “get your toy” just before your dog picks up the toy. Click and treat for holding the toy. Practice cueing the behavior in multiple different locations, but still out of context of the original barking scenario. When the cued behavior is well established and your dog responds in a variety of locations, racing away to find and carry his toy to you, you can begin to perform set-ups of barking scenarios. Use friends or family member arrivals in these mock scenarios, cue “get your toy” after a bark or two, and reinforce with toy play or a treat. Gradually progress to real-life situations. Remember, barking to announce arrival is natural behavior for your dog, so stick to your goal of reduced barking as opposed to no barking. In time, the sight of passersby will be announced by fewer barks and the delivery of a toy for cooperative play.

## **2. Alert barking**

The hallmark of alert barking is its occurrence in locations outside of your dog’s familiar areas when he feels startled or frightened by sights or sounds. In this scenario, your dog’s body language may indicate he feels fearful or threatened and he barks in attempt to keep the scary sight or sound away. Alert barks usually indicate a socialization concern and is best alleviated by pairing unfamiliar sights and sounds with high-value food to create positive feelings toward the worrisome sight or sound. Work slowly and systematically with these dogs by exposing to sights and sounds at a distance or reduced volume. It is essential to expose at a level that does not elicit the full-blown fearful response to successfully modify your dog’s current fearful association. Slow and steady wins this race.

## **3. Demand barking**

Your dog may bark as a means of voicing his request for something. Demand barking is a well-developed strategy reinforced over time by your dog receiving his request for attention, ball

play, food, or the opportunity to go outdoors. The best strategy to reduce demand barking is to look for alternative behaviors to reinforce with your attention, playtime, and food. If your dog routinely barks to initiate ball play, begin to notice the quiet moments that precede barky demands for interaction. To shift your dog's request strategy, reinforce these quiet moments with ball play. As long as you are attentive to quiet opportunities to reinforce with play, your dog's barking strategy will diminish and he will learn effective, quiet strategies to gain your attention and request interaction.

#### **4. Boredom barking**

Barking as a symptom of boredom is commonly seen in dogs who spend significant time alone in their backyard or tied on a long line affixed to a stationary object. Boredom barking may be accompanied by repetitive behavior such as running back and forth along the fence line. This type of barking signifies a need for increased mental and physical activity and interaction.

If your dog is an outside dog, his barking may be alleviated by increased social interaction with you and your family members. Consider bringing him indoors for inclusion in family life and the social bonding and enrichment provided by interaction with you. If indoor opportunities are not an option, increase neighborhood walks and engage in playful activities together such as fetch or Frisbee, join a training class, or visit local parks to provide increased enrichment to his day. Additionally, strategic feeding activities provide the benefit of combined mental enrichment and physical activity. Opportunities to forage for food can be provided by sprinkling kibble in your yard or providing treat toys for your dog to chew, bounce, and toss to release the meal inside.

#### **5. Separation anxiety barking**

Vocalization in the form of prolonged and excessive barking during an owner's absence may indicate separation anxiety. Separation anxiety barking generally presents in conjunction with other telltale behavioral symptoms expressed when the owner is absent, including some combination of urination and defecation, refusal to eat when alone, self-injury when attempting to escape from crate or house, and destruction and damage to exit points of your home (doorways, windows). If you believe your dog is suffering from separation anxiety, please speak with your veterinarian, certified applied animal behaviorist, or other qualified behavior consultant to provide an appropriate and thorough treatment plan designed for you and your dog.