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Barking – What Does it Mean and How Do We Manage It

Introduction

Dogs primarily signal their emotions and intentions through visual means, but they clearly also use barking and other sounds to communicate with each other and with us. A dog's bark is one of the most recognizable sounds to most human beings. Yet for many people, few things are so grating on our nerves and so disruptive to the neighbours as barking. Why does it bother us so much?

There are likely a few reasons why we are so sensitive to barking. Human beings naturally communicate through sound (language), but we are typically not very good at understanding the visual signals from our dogs. This frustrates our dogs and so they resort to barking to get the point across. Of course, barking can often be loud and repetitive and be caused by a variety of things. When we don't understand the dog's message, we get frustrated and annoyed. Finally, we can often fail to give our dogs the proper feedback when they bark. This frustrates and annoys the dog and leads to more barking!

In this article, we discuss the causes of barking, typical types of barking and how we can respond in ways that calm our dogs and help to avoid or manage problems. It is also worth noting that some breeds are much more prone to barking than others. For a more fulsome discussion of barking, please see the excellent book "Barking: The Sound of a Language" by Turid Rugaas.

What is a Bark?

The answer seems obvious – it is the sound a dog makes that is not a whine, howl or growl. However, there are several types of barking and all of them are meant to convey information. Our dogs are telling us something. We just have to listen and then respond appropriately. Yelling at the dog to "be quiet" is never a good option; at best, it is ineffective and at worst, it can cause the barking to escalate and create other problems such as fear and anxiety.

Do all Barks Mean the Same Thing?

Not all barks are created equal. Even similar barks can mean different things depending on the context and the body language of the dog. Most people can easily recognize and understand the meaning behind excitement barks and warning barks. For example, in anticipation of play, your dog may bark for you to throw a ball. Dogs typically issue warning barks when they hear strange sounds coming from outside the house (or when the doorbell rings). However, other types of barks that stem from fear, guarding or frustration (often linked to anxiety) are sometimes harder to identify and interpret. Barking can also be a learned behaviour and become a habit.

When Barking Becomes a Problem

Dogs bark as a means of communication. We must accept that fact. It would be unnatural and somehow pathetic if a dog never barked. If someone tries to break into your house at night, do you want your dog to bark at the intruder? Of course you do! Hence, the goal is never to eliminate barking entirely, but rather to train ourselves to understand what the dog is trying to communicate and provide the appropriate feedback so that the barking does not escalate into a long, repetitive pattern.

Barking becomes exaggerated and problematic when the dog reaches the point where it cannot cope either due to fear, stress or the fact that no one “listened” (i.e., no one got the message) when the dog tried to communicate in a more normal manner. Some dogs can have acute “fits” of barking only in certain situations while others can become chronic barkers. In any case, you have to figure out what your dog is trying to tell you and then respond appropriately, giving the dog the assurance and guidance it needs to settle down and realize that his message was received and understood and that you, the leader, will handle the situation.

Where to Begin?

First, we must determine if barking is really a problem. People (and neighbours) often overreact and think their dogs are barking far more than they actually are. Keeping a journal is an effective way of collecting objective data on your dog’s barking. Enter the date, time, duration of barking, how the bark sounds, the situation (where is the dog, where are you), what you think the dog is barking at and what the dog is doing while barking (e.g., body language, movement, etc.). Doing this for a few weeks will give you real insight into what may be happening and give clues to the nature and severity of the problem (if there is a problem).

What to Do If Barking is a Problem

Whether barking is an actual problem depends on your dog’s state of mind when he is barking AND the reactions of those within earshot. Let’s start with a common situation where the neighbours complain about your dog’s barking. Such complaints can be legitimate (e.g., your dog is barking incessantly during the night when everyone is trying to sleep) or maybe your neighbour is annoyed by even a single bark during the day (some people have an extremely low tolerance for barking).

We will deal with truly problematic forms of barking in a moment, but there are a few ways to address the complaints of a neighbour:

- Politely recognize their complaint and ask them to give you specific information about why the barking is a problem for them and under what conditions the barking occurred (time, duration, etc.)
- Keep a journal (see above) and share it with your neighbour. Facts are helpful.
- Introduce your dog to your neighbours in a calm and inviting environment (e.g., have them over for coffee, go for a walk). Ensure your dog is well behaved.

It is remarkable how often some people cannot tolerate any form of barking from certain breeds (e.g., small “yappy” dogs or large “intimidating” breeds) and/or they form opinions of dogs (just from hearing them bark!) they do not know. Once a calm, positive and enjoyable introduction is made, many people will be far more tolerant of occasional and situational barking.

How we deal with more exaggerated and excessive barking depends on (1) the type of barking and (2) the frequency/severity of barking. The frequency and severity of barking is almost always a result of how we respond (or don't respond) and the guidance we give your dogs.

There are several ways we can and should respond to barking, but we should never reprimand (verbally or physically) our dogs for barking. Why not? Scolding your dog won't address or "solve" the problem. It might temporarily stop your dog from barking, but there could be serious side effects such as fear, anxiety and aggression.

Now, we can teach our dogs to "be quiet", but we must first acknowledge that we have understood their message and we are going to address the situation. This requires a strong bond and level of trust between you as leader and your dog. Obedience training is an excellent way to build such trust, relieve anxiety in your dog and give your dog the "tools" to cope with potentially stressful situations. Also, you must ensure your dog's needs (emotional, physical and mental) are being met. This is not solely about exercise, but bonding time, intellectual stimulation and allowing your dog to exhibit natural behaviours. When a dog's needs regularly suffer, barking can result.

Dogs will almost always bark while inside the house when they hear something outside. The bark could be from excitement (e.g., someone rang the doorbell) or a warning. In either case, your dog is alerting you of the presence of someone or something outside and we absolutely want our dogs to do this. However, we do not want the barking to go on endlessly or to escalate (except if there is real danger). Here is what you should do:

- Get up, acknowledge your dog, but do not touch your dog. You can say "thank you" or "good boy, I got it". Your dog will realize that you heard the message, but he may still be worried or excited.
- Calmly walk to the door, putting yourself between the door and your dog (i.e., the dog is behind you) with your back to your dog. Outstretch the palm of your hand behind you so your dog sees your hand. Dogs will interpret this as your taking control and hence their message was understood. You as leader will handle things now and your dog did his job well.

Dogs bark for a wide variety of reasons: excitement, fear, warning, guarding, frustration and they can definitely bark because it has become a "learned behaviour". Here are two common barking issues.

1. **Excitement Barking.** This is often easy to recognize by short, repetitive, high-pitched barks. This is common when we return home to the dog or the dog knows a fun activity is coming (e.g., going to the dog park, into the car for a hike, etc.). When a dog is barking from excitement, asking him to sit and be still is not realistic and not advised. His body wants to move. Instead, redirect his attention by asking him to do something! Ask him to get a toy ("get your bunny", throw a ball or give him a Kong filled with peanut butter and kibble in the car. When you come home, be calm. Greeting your dog in a frenzy, however enjoyable, will only intensify the barking. The same techniques apply when guests come to visit. You may need to keep your dog on a leash. Excited dogs often love something in their mouths (a toy, a bone). A dog with something in his mouth cannot easily bark!

Excitement barking can also occur from chronic stress. Stress occurs when the dog cannot cope or settle down and remains in a hyperactive state. This can occur from "excessive" ball-throwing, chasing, dog play and when owners themselves are chronically stressed or angry (dogs are very sensitive to our emotional states) or place excessively high demands on their dogs.

We must recognize that excitement barking is very similar to barking due to anxiety and stress. The

barks sound the same, but the contexts and sources are entirely different.

Try to assess a few things about the daily environment and routine:

- Is your dog getting enough rest (alone time) and too much or too little sleep?
- Is the home too chaotic? Dogs crave predictability and structure.
- Are there too many strangers (dogs and people) interacting with the dog?

Minor stresses that occur irregularly are totally fine and part of life, but daily repetitive stress can become chronic to the point the dog can no longer cope.

First and foremost, do not reward the wrong behaviour. Any kind of attention (which your dog seeks) given at the wrong time can be viewed as a reward by your dog (e.g., touching, looking at or talking to your dog). Yelling at your dog to “be quiet” really won’t help.

Do not punish your dog for barking by jerking a leash, yelling or spraying him with water. Also, asking a dog to sit calmly when he is barking excitedly is unfair and unrealistic. Ask for a different type of engagement. If your dog is barking out of anticipation for a fun activity, then ask him to engage in another way (get your ball, here is your bone). Also, you must be consistent. It will confuse your dog if you are happy at some times when he barks excitedly, but annoyed at other times.

2. **Fear barking.** This is a high-pitched bark, almost frenzied at times. Your dog is clearly communicating. The dog’s body will not be relaxed or playful, but tense. The dog will continuously move and not always away from the threat. The dog may also seek to allay her fear by grabbing objects in her mouth – branches, grasses and sometimes you or her own legs! Never reprimand fear barking. Your dog needs guidance and assurance, not further stress. You might realize the situation is not problematic, but your dog’s feelings are different from yours.

Fearful dogs start with body language and displacement behaviours (licking lips, lifting paws, yawning, etc.). If those do not work, they escalate to significant posturing. Then to lip-curling and facial displays. Then to barking and growling. When all that fails, and they do not consider escape an option, they bite as a last resort. A dog that has escalated to a panic state and chooses to bite will not listen to you. You must leave the situation immediately.

Fear is a natural emotion for all animals. It has allowed species to survive. Most often, we choose “flight” over “fight” because it is the safest option. However, how quickly a dog is afraid and in what context is based on learned experiences and often past trauma. If your dog has fear-based reactivity, in whatever form, you should seek the advice of a professional dog trainer.

In Summary

Barking is a natural form of communication in dogs. Try to understand (and keep a journal) when, why and under what conditions your dog barks. Never reprimand. Remain calm and show your dog that you, as leader, will give the guidance he needs to cope. Barking can be very stressful for owners and dogs, but most of the time it can be managed to an acceptable level.