
Dogs that are barking aggressively or growling can be very dangerous to others.

THE BARKING DOG

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Dogs that bark, howl or make other noises for long periods of time or that make noises very early in the morning or late at night can be real nuisances. Such vocalizing may also indicate that the dog is distressed, in pain or ill, and for his sake as well as that of the neighborhood, the cause of the problem must be identified and a solution found.

What are the Causes of Problem Barking?

Dogs not only bark but make a variety of other sounds such as howling, whining, yelping, and growling. All of the reasons for barking listed below represent normal behavior for dogs. The barking is labeled a problem when it annoys people, or if the dog is distressed.

Vocalizations usually have some sort of communicative function, but this may not always be the case as you'll see from the following list of motivations. Categorizing the many motivations for barking is somewhat arbitrary, a bout of barking may have more than one motivation and the categories we'll discuss below overlap to some degree.

Barking is not caused by a lack of dominance or leadership by the family or a lack of obedience training. Dominance, leadership or obedience exercises will not help.

What Can You Do About Your Dog's Problem Barking?

If you don't already know this, you'll soon see that there are many reasons why dogs bark. Because of this, it's difficult to make just a few general recommendations about what to do if your dog is barking too much. It's likely you may need the help of a certified applied or veterinary behaviorist or other behavior consultant to help you sort through your options. Talk to your pet professional about help or a referral. You can find out more about trainers and behavior consultants in the Pamphlet for Pet Parents of the same name.

You should also speak with your veterinarian if you have any concerns that your dog's vocalizations could be due to pain, discomfort, or illness.

The first step is to identify why your dog is barking so much. Without that information you'll just be guessing about what to do, and chances are your guess will be wrong.

Once you know what's causing your dog to bark, general strategies to reduce your dog's barking are:

1. modify your dog's environment so he's not exposed to what's making him bark
2. reward your dog for being quiet, and/or teach him to do something other than bark in response to whatever is causing the barking
3. because barking is usually associated with some sort of emotional arousal, you can consider how you can help your dog be calmer and less motivated to bark

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4. suppress the barking with carefully considered, limited, and appropriate use of punishment. This could be in the form of an anti-bark collar or other remote, automatic device or something less aversive such as verbal discipline. Inappropriate or too harsh punishment can create more problems and even result in cruel treatment. Punishment should never be used for barking problems motivated by fear or anxiety.

Aggressive, Offensive Barking. Dogs may bark or growl at people or other animals when they want to warn them to go away or stop what they are doing. Territorial barking may fall into this category. The dog will appear threatening as well, and may bare his teeth, hold his tail straight up and even lunge at the intruder.

What To Do. Dogs that are barking aggressively or growling can be very dangerous to others. Before you do anything else you must prevent the dog from harming others by securing him away from people or muzzling him. The barking is only a symptom of the aggression, which is the real problem. You will need the help of a certified applied or veterinary behaviorist for this behavior, after seeing your veterinarian to evaluate potential medical problems.

Alarm or Alerting Barking. Sometimes referred to as “nuisance barking”, dogs will sometimes bark in reaction to something exciting or unfamiliar in their world. Stimuli that trigger this type of barking might be the sound of a delivery truck, a car door shutting across the street, the approach of visitors, wind and weather noises, or the barking of other dogs. Dogs usually appear excited or even friendly while engaging in this type of barking.

What To Do. Teach your dog to be calmer and more relaxed in these contexts. Alternatively, confine your dog away from these situations. This is an acceptable management technique, but won’t change his behavior. An anti-bark collar or other remote device may be considered.

Defensive or Fear Motivated Barking. Dogs may bark, whine, or even howl when they are frightened or stressed. Separation anxiety is a common reason for excessive barking when dogs are home alone. Dogs often bark at frightening noises such as thunder or the sounds from hot air balloons. These dogs will look fearful, with their ears back and tails tucked, and may also be trying to escape or avoid whatever is frightening them.

What To Do. Just as with aggressively motivated barking, the real problem in this situation is the dog’s fear. Fear combined with threats or aggression results in defensive behavior, which may include barking. You will need the help of a certified applied or veterinary behaviorist to resolve fear motivated problems. If you think your dog is barking when left alone due to separation anxiety, read the Pamphlet for Pet Parents on this topic. You may also want to speak with your veterinarian about the possibility of medication that can be used in conjunction with behavior modification to reduce your dog’s fear or anxiety.

Attention-getting, Frustration or “Boredom”. These categories overlap a bit so we’ve combined them. Dogs frequently bark or howl to get attention from others, when they are frustrated at not getting to something, such as

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Using an anti-bark collar for aggression, fear or anxiety problems can make the barking worse and create more behavior problems.

the squirrel in the tree, or simply to give themselves something to do. While barking, the dogs may appear excited or friendly. Frustration and attention getting barking may be accompanied by other behaviors such as jumping, running or pawing.

Barking for any reason can sometimes become a compulsive disorder. In these cases, the barking is quite repetitive and the dogs may engage in other repetitive behaviors such as running in circles or jumping at the walls.

What To Do. Change your dog's routine to better meet his behavioral needs. Give your dog more activities to occupy his time, and more social and play time with you. Consider more interactive, food filled toys your dog can spend time coaxing tidbits from.

Protect your dog from whatever is frustrating him. How to do so will depend on the specifics of your dog's behavior and his environment. Some dogs are less frustrated when they can see things; others are just the opposite. Closing or opening drapes and blinds, leaving your dog inside, leaving a radio or television on to mask noises your dog may be barking at are all options.

How Can I Prevent Barking Problems?

Once again, because barking is motivated by so many different factors, an effective prevention program for all sorts of barking problems doesn't exist. Breeds, as well as individual dogs, differ in their propensity to bark. If you've chosen a breed, or a particular dog with a low threshold for barking, you may have to work harder to prevent excessive barking from becoming a problem.

Remember that dogs do what works. So if you reward your dog for barking by giving him what he wants, he will be more inclined to bark. To get attention from you or others, teach your dog to sit quietly or to ask for attention in some other quiet and calm way.

Socialize your dog, so he isn't anxious or afraid when he encounters something unfamiliar, including startling noises, and therefore is less likely to bark. Similarly, don't encourage protective or territorial behavior that can lead to excessive barking.

Teach your dog how to greet people in a calm, relaxed and friendly way and discourage out-of-control behavior. Teach your dog how to be calm and friendly in the presence of exciting things such as people walking by your property.

Provide a quality environment for your dog. Avoid leaving him home alone long hours, day after day with little to occupy his time. Give your dog stimulating things to do when he is away from you, such as toys stuffed with tasty treats or social companionship from a person or other dog to prevent boredom and isolation barking.

When you acquire a puppy or a new adult dog, gradually accustom your dog to being left alone. If you will be temporarily crating your dog while he is being housetrained, you must accustom your dog to being left alone while crated as well. Dogs not acclimated to being alone and/or confined may be quite distressed and bark for long time periods. See the Pamphlets for Pet Parents on separation anxiety and crate training for more information.

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Anti-Bark Collars and Surgical Debarking

Anti-bark collars that deliver electrical stimulation, spray the dog with startling scent under his chin or emit an audible or ultrasonic noise can be effective in stopping some kinds of barking. However, these collars must be used with extreme care. If they are used to suppress barking due to aggression, fear or anxiety, they can create more behavior problems. It is a good idea to talk to a certified applied or veterinary behaviorist if you are considering an anti-bark collar.

Surgical debarking may be a last resort for some owners. Discuss this option with your veterinarian.

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