



Barking

Barking is a noisy but completely normal part of canine communication, although some individuals might be more likely to bark than others. However, if barking becomes frequent or prolonged it can be as much a problem for the dog as it is for the owners or neighbours! So, it's important to act early to help prevent normal barking from developing to a worrying stage.

Why do dogs bark?

It may not always feel like it to us, but dogs bark for a real purpose! 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.

Barking to Get Something Good to Happen

Most dogs enjoy having our attention, whether that's looking at and talking to 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 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. As food preparation always happens just before they get to eat, excited dogs might 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 works to get them a fun game, they may learn to bark every time they want us to play with them.

Dogs that are distressed about being left home alone may howl or bark in an attempt to regain contact with their owners. Dogs are naturally social animals; however, most owners have commitments that mean their dogs might be left home alone. Unless a dog has been taught how to be relaxed by themselves this can be scary or frustrating! If owners return home when their dog is barking, the dog might feel that barking was a good thing to do because it worked to bring the owner home. They might then try it again next time they're on their own. However simply ignoring a dog who is barking when left, 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 Coping Home Alone handout gives useful advice on how to teach your dog to relax by themselves, calmly and quietly. A dog who barks in order to be reunited with their owner, or to gain any form of company, might need some help from a professionally qualified behaviourist.

Barking to Prevent Something Bad from Happening

Just like humans, dogs can be scared of anything! 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 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. For example, some dogs may find the post-person coming up the path and pushing letters through the door frightening. If they started barking as the post-person arrived at the front door, they might connect their barking with the post-person turning and walking away. They might bark again the next day and find it makes the post-person go away again. The dog has no way of understanding that the post-person was going to go leave anyway, so barking certainly seems to be the best thing to do. Dogs who are worried about something in the environment 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!

Preventing problems

The more a dog keeps themselves feeling safe by barking, the more likely they'll 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. Puppies need to encounter a range of different people, noises and experiences during their 'socialisation period' (between about 3 and 12 weeks of age) so they accept them as a normal and positive part of life. This includes learning to be calm when alone, as well as learning about people coming in and out of the house or coming to put post through the door then heading off again! This will give them the best chance of coping well in various situations throughout their life.

The introduction of new experiences needs to be gradual and controlled. It's also important that puppies are not already anxious or fearful when experiencing new things, as this will increase the risk that they will associate the new thing with these negative feelings. Our Dog School classes provide the perfect opportunity for puppies to learn these vital skills. See www.DogsTrust.ie/DogSchool for your nearest class.

What to do

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. The key to reducing and even preventing barking is to understand why the dog is barking in the first place. Then we can learn what the dog hopes to

gain from barking and teach them that they can obtain this by behaving in a different, quieter manner instead. We might also be able to make changes to the environment so that our dog no longer feels the need to bark.

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

- If your dog is barking for something very specific, such as making another dog go away, it's useful to teach them that doing something quieter and safer will get them the same result. This might 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 your dog to put their nose to the floor and sniff out tasty treats instead of barking at another dog or person can be useful.

- 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 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 they're scared of and help them change the way they feel.

- Dogs might be more likely to bark if they're not getting enough mental or physical exercise, so 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.

- Although it may be frustrating, especially if you have neighbours to consider, telling your dog off might make them anxious or confused about you. This could even contribute to the problem, 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! 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, be aware that when you start ignoring them they are likely to bark even more to begin with. They may become confused when you don't react as they are expecting you to, so try 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 quietness brings them the reward they want. Over time you should find they become quiet much more quickly, as long as you are consistent and make sure you reward them when they're quiet. It's 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 thank you in the long run! Stay consistent, as giving in and

responding to their barking, even if just the once, is likely to teach them to persist and try even harder. Dogs Trust provide lifelong behavioural support for all our adopted dogs.

Dogs Trust provide lifelong behavioural support for all our adopted dogs. If you need help for your Dogs Trust Dog, please email: reception@dogstrust.ie

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The advice contained in this handout is of a general nature and is no substitute for specific behavioural or veterinary advice.