



Barking

What is your dog telling you?

A lot of dogs like to bark and most of the time they're trying to tell us something! Sometimes, however, a dog may bark a lot, disturbing neighbours, keeping you awake at night or frightening visitors to your home. You don't want to get into trouble because of your dog's barking – so what can you do?

The first thing to do is to try to work out why your dog is barking. If you can remove the cause, he should stop, although perhaps a bit of training may also be needed.

As each case is different, we can only make suggestions and some guidelines which we hope will be useful, however, for accurate advice you may need to contact a reputable behaviour specialist.

Your dog could be barking because he is excited, frustrated, guarding, bored, trying to get your attention, scared or because he cannot cope with being on his own.

If he is excited he will probably bark when visitors call, when you get his lead to go for a walk and when you make his dinner. He may also jump around and act like a 'hooligan'!

- If he is excited because the rest of his day is so boring and quiet, try introducing some interesting activities into his routine. Try clicker training and simple puzzle-solving games (i.e. find the treat under a cup) and take him out more often during the day for calm walks with plenty of sniffing allowed. Keep interactions calm with plenty of gentle praise and rewards – the idea is to exercise his mind, more so than his body.
- Brush up on his obedience training and train him to go and fetch a rubber ball or soft toy in his mouth. If you command him to do this every time he starts barking, he'll soon automatically do this – barking is a lot harder and quieter if a dog already has something in his mouth! **Remember that asking a dog to do an alternative acceptable behaviour is far easier than asking him to completely stop an unwanted behaviour.**
- You could try exposing him to the barking 'triggers' repeatedly over a few days, ignoring his reaction and then praising/rewarding him as soon as he quiets down – but this can be a long and annoying process that may not work very well!
- Remember – don't shout at him to stop barking as he may think that you are excited too and are joining in! This could make him bark even more loudly.

If he is frustrated he will be barking because he can't get to something that he finds exciting. Perhaps he's seen a cat in the garden, children playing on the street or can hear another dog barking next door. He may also scratch at the door or garden gate, or jump up at the windows in an effort to get closer.

- Find out what is making him bark and then, if you can, prevent him from seeing, hearing or smelling it. If you're going out, close the curtains and put the radio or television on to drown out offending noises.
- Don't leave your dog alone for long periods in the garden, if this is where he does most of his barking. Play more games with him, so he'll be too busy to bark.

- You could try getting him used to the sounds by recording them and playing them back at low volumes during times when he is already quiet and relaxed. Give him treats and lots of praise if when he stays relaxed.
- Alternatively brush up on your basic training and have sessions where you ask for sits, downs and stands in a random manner, using lots of treats and praise, at times when the triggers are present. This will help train your dog to be focussed on you, rather than the distractions.
- Unneutered male dogs can smell a bitch in season up to 6 miles away. If this is contributing to the problem, consider talking to your vet about the possibility of castration.
- If your dog is hungry (i.e. if he only has one meal a day), frustration and guarding behaviour (see below) can become worse. Make sure your dog has plenty to eat throughout the day – several smaller meals are far better than one large meal.

If he is guarding he will be barking to protect himself and his family, or to alert you to potential threats. He may also wag his tail and appear to be excited. Guarding behaviour should stop once the 'threat' has gone – e.g. once you have answered the doorbell and he recognises the visitor as a friend. Your dog may be a guarding 'breed' or crossbreed, or he may have been encouraged to bark at the doorbell from an early age.

- Provide your dog with a mat or a bed and place it near the door – but out of the way. At quiet times, teach your dog to lay down on his mat, using a new command word, e.g. "mat!" and using lots of really tasty treats. Repeat this often until you are able to use the command word from another room, and he'll run to his mat to wait for his treat.
- Now ask a friend to help by ringing the doorbell. Send your dog to the mat and give him lots of praise and rewards when he lies in the correct place. Repeat this several times until he gets the idea. You'll know when this is, when he goes to his mat and lays down without being told, when the doorbell rings.
- Keep a pot of treats by the door, so that visitors can toss him a treat as they enter and he is quiet and relaxed on his mat.
- As is the case for frustration (see above) – unwanted guarding behaviour can become worse if your dog is hungry. Make sure your dog has plenty to eat throughout the day – several smaller meals are far better than one large meal.
- **If you are worried that your dog's guarding behaviour may become aggressive please seek the advice of a behaviour specialist.**

If he is bored he may bark when he has nothing to do. He may also be destructive in an effort to amuse himself. Bored dogs will bark or be destructive when you are in the house as well as when they're left alone.

- Start by introducing some interesting activities into his routine. Try clicker training and simple puzzle-solving games (i.e. find the treat under a cup) and take him out more often during the day for calm walks with plenty of sniffing allowed. Keep interactions calm with plenty of gentle praise and rewards – the idea is to exercise his mind, more so than his body. A really good book full of ideas is 'Playtime for your dog – keep him busy throughout the day' by Christina Sondermann.
- Don't leave him alone for long periods of time and try to get a dog walker if you are out at work all day.
- Consider getting him a companion dog, if your situation is suitable – he'll be too busy playing to be bored! If not, at least try to arrange regular 'play-dates' with the well-behaved dogs of friends and family.

If he is trying to get your attention he will seemingly bark for no reason and then stop as soon as you speak or look at him. He may bark when you are speaking on the phone, watching television or stopping to talk to another dog owner in the park – in fact, any time he is feeling ignored!

- This can often arise if your dog has inadvertently trained you to give him attention, so now you'll need to teach him that there are certain times when he cannot have attention.
- Start by training a really good 'down-stay' using a hand signal e.g. the flat palm of your hand moving downwards towards the floor.
- Once your dog knows what this means, hide some treats in your pocket and get a book. Open the book, hold it in one hand and walk around the room pretending to read it, with your other hand out in the 'down-stay' signal. Look at the book, not your dog (who should hopefully still be in 'down') and count to ten. If your dog is still quiet, put the book down, remove the hand signal and go to your dog to praise and reward with a treat. If not, wait until he is quiet before rewarding and next time reduce the count time to 5 or less and work up.
- Repeat this many times, slowly increasing the amount of time that you ask him to lay quietly. Then start again, without the book this time but still not looking at your dog and just using the hand-signal.
- This hand signal can now be used whenever there is a situation where your dog's barking for attention is a problem.
- Make sure that you give him lots of 'free' attention every day. If your dog is seeking attention because you ignore him unless he's annoying you with his barking, you won't be able to stop him – all dogs need social and physical contact and as far as they're concerned a telling off is better than no attention at all.

If he is scared he may bark at strangers, dogs or in certain situations. When he barks his ears may be back and his tail held low and he will stand away from whatever is frightening him. Even small movements or eye contact from the fear object may start your dog barking, although this should stop when he is ignored.

- Dogs that are scared bark to tell us that they are not happy and this is a good thing because it gives us a warning that they cannot cope. Frightened dogs may eventually bite to get the 'scary' thing to go away and so it is important that you don't ignore the warning.
- If your dog is scared of certain things or situations, making him face his fears is the worse thing to do. Instead, try to avoid them and ask your vet to refer you to a behaviourist who can help your dog to safely get over his fears.

If he can't cope with being left alone he'll seem anxious before you leave him and then start barking as soon as you walk out of sight. He may also be destructive and/or soil the home.

- This type of problem can be serious and difficult to fix so start by reading our 'Beating boredom and Coping alone' factsheet and consider contacting a behaviour specialist for help.
- If this only happens at night when he is shut away to sleep by himself, consider letting him sleep in sight and sound of the family (e.g. on the landing with a baby gate) or in the bedroom with a family member.

If you need more help with your dog's problem barking, please contact your Training & Behaviour Advisor (if you have a Dogs Trust dog), or ask your vet to put you in touch with a behaviour specialist.

For more information about Dogs Trust, to make a donation or help us in our campaigns please call 01 879 1000 or write to:

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www.dogstrust.ie

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