



The ABC's of Barking

It is normal for dogs to bark; however, in the world of humans, it is disruptive, and can be problematic for every reason you can imagine. If your dog's barking is driving you crazy and you want the behavior to change, you must first find out the cause of the barking. Below are some common types of problem barking. Please note that any dog who appears overly anxious, or whose behavior changes suddenly, should be seen by a veterinarian to make sure it is not ill. And if your dog barks for hours when home alone, defecate or urinates (even if housetrained), tries to escape from the crate or house when left alone, or if your dog's barking seems aggressive and it frightens you, see a behaviorist for professional help.

How do dogs learn? As it turns out, all organisms learn from the "ABC's," also known as antecedent → behavior → consequence. Start with A, for "antecedent." Before every behavior, there exists an antecedent, sometimes called a "trigger." Observe your dog and note the triggers that make your dog bark, i.e., a ringing doorbell, the mail carrier, passing traffic, other dogs, being alone, bicycles, etc.

"B" is for behavior. Behavior is best defined specifically. Is it loud and scary, and happens when a stranger comes to the door? Is it excited and happy, like when you have a favorite toy the dog likes to chase?

"C" is for consequence, or what happens *after* the barking that makes it increase or decrease in the future. What happens after the barking? Does the dog "get" something, like your attention, even if that means your saying "Quiet!?" Did you "distract" the dog with a toy? Did the mail carrier go away?

If you keep detailed records on your dog's barking, you will see patterns emerge. Knowing when and why the behavior happens will help you to know how best to change it.

How to Stop Barking

Prevention: Since barking can be reinforced in so many ways: by your attention, by others going away, etc., generally, the best way to stop barking is to ...**prevent it:**

- If you know your dog will bark at the mail carrier, be ready with a handful of treats and throw them away from the door so that the dog is eating treats while the mail is being delivered;
- If your dog barks at passers-by outside, get some plastic window film so your dog can't see out the windows. Play some white noise inside so they can't hear the outside as well (there are many YouTube sites that play these sounds for hours);
- If your dog barks at squirrels/rabbits/other dogs, give the dog their favorite treat the **SECOND** they see the other animal, **BEFORE THEY BARK**. For this to be effective, you have to keep your dog at a distance at which they will not be too excited to eat.
- If your dog barks at the doorbell, you can try getting a remote doorbell and ringing it while you are indoors, giving the dog a treat when you ring it. Then, tape that doorbell outside. That probably won't completely stop the barking, but it may ameliorate it.
- If your dog barks when people are coming into your home, try meeting your visitors outside and walking in together, or keeping your dog in another room and bringing them out on a leash, working for treats, once your guests have settled.

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“Attention” or “demand” barking: Do you typically scold your dog for barking, or do you “redirect” their attention to a toy? If that is the case, you are unintentionally rewarding the barking, which will cause it to keep happening.

One choice is to ignore the attention-seeking/demand behavior. This is called “extinction.” In extinction, a previously rewarded behavior is no longer rewarded. *Be warned: in a phenomenon known as an “extinction burst,” the behavior will get worse before it goes away.* The danger is this: you ignore the barking for ten minutes until it is so loud and distracting you finally yell “Be QUIET!” at the dog. You have now rewarded the behavior at its strongest level, and are back at square one. If you are going to undertake this mission, bring cookies to all of your neighbors and explain what you are going to do. Explain to all household members that the rule is to ignore all barking. It took time to build the barking behavior to the problem point, and it will take time for it to go away. Be patient and consistent, and *remember to give the dog a LOT of attention when they are NOT barking.*

Can you make them stop? You can teach your dog a word like “Quiet,” which will mean “Come away from where you are and stop barking:

1. If you hear them bark, say “Quiet,” and call them to you. Go get them if you need to, and leash them. Bring them to where you were and give them a treat. (*Practice calling them to you often, so they will get into the habit of coming when called.*)
2. When they come to you when you say “Quiet,” ask them to lie down then give them a treat.
3. Next step, once that is consistent: ask them to lie down but have them hold the down for 30-seconds before delivering the treat.
4. Next step, once that is consistent: ask for a 1-minute down, then release them with a treat.
5. Finally, you will call them to you, ask to them to lie down, and not give them a treat at all. Keep them there until they are calm, then release him by saying “Okay.”
6. Always call them at the FIRST bark and bring them away from where they are.
7. And if they are consistently barking at something predictable, plan to prevent the barking from starting in the future.

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