

Your Smart Dog Barking Mad! January 2010

One of the most common problems I'm asked to solve is that of the barking dog. Some dogs bark at the doorbell, others bark at shadows. Still other dogs bark because they're bored, or scared, or anxious, or worriers. Barking has many causes, and we're going to start the new year looking at the many reasons dogs bark and how you can decrease your dog's barking.

BARKING IS NORMAL

The first thing to realize is that barking is normal behavior for a dog. **Barking is one of the ways a dog communicates.** Dogs bark when they're happy. Dogs bark when they're startled. Dogs bark to get attention. Dogs bark as a warning. Dogs just bark.

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Some dogs are more likely to bark than others because they've been bred specifically to bark. Shetland Sheepdogs (Shelties) for example, were bred to move flocks of sheep. The Sheltie bark was useful because those stubborn sheep would move more quickly when barked at. A Sheltie that didn't bark wasn't bred.

Some dogs bark because they're anxious or frightened. **More often than not, however, barking is a learned behavior – it's served an important purpose in the dog's mind.** For example: the dog barks at the UPS or FedEx delivery truck and voila, the truck leaves! The dog's barking has been reinforced! In the dog's mind, barking = ability to drive intruders away. Perhaps the dog has learned that when he barks, he earns interaction with his owner. Or maybe he's learned that when he barks, he feels better (think of the person you know who just loves to hear himself speak!).

You won't get rid of barking by yelling at, yanking, or ignoring your dog.

HOW NOT TO SOLVE BARKING ISSUES

Before I give you the solutions to curb your dog's barking, let's take a look at some things to avoid doing. How many of these have you already tried?

Yelling – The dog barks, you yell "quit it!" But to no avail. Many owners are frustrated that yelling doesn't seem to shut their dog up. There's a good reason for that: the **dog likely thinks you're barking right along with him!**

Ignoring – Ignoring a barking dog will only solve the problem if your dog is barking for attention. If he's barking because he's scared or because someone's at the door, ignoring won't get you very far in decreasing the barking.

Yanking – This one's obvious – you aren't going to solve your dog's barking issues by yanking on the collar. And if your dog is barking because he's frustrated, fearful, or anxious, you're going to make the problem worse.

HOW TO CURB EXCESSIVE BARKING

Ok, so barking's normal. **But what if that barking is excessive and you need relief?** Try these solutions:

Teach "speak" and "quiet" together – Put the barking on cue, and also put closing the mouth on cue. To do this, elicit the barking by knocking on the door. Once the dog is barking, click and deliver a treat. While the dog's mouth is closed (still eating the treat), say "quiet," (or whatever word you want) and click and treat. Start the dog



Laurie Luck, KPA CTP
Box 1111
Mount Airy, MD 21771
(240) 848-3468
laurie@smartdoguniversity.com



barking again (with the knock, if needed) and repeat the process several times.

Now it's time to add the cue for speak. (We've already added the cue for quiet when the dog's mouth was closed, eating the treat). Say "speak" (or whatever word you want to use) and then elicit the barking (again with the knock, if necessary). Click and treat when the dog barks. Then say "quiet" and click and treat when the dog's mouth is closed.

MORE GOOD IDEAS

Teaching your dog to turn his head toward you when you call his name is also helpful. If you can't get your dog to look at you, it's much more difficult to tell him to "quiet." Teaching this is relatively simple using the clicker.

Click and treat your dog for free five times in rapid succession. For the sixth click, the dog needs to look in your direction. He'll probably look at you rather quickly when he realizes there's no treat coming and when he does, click! You're capturing with the clicker the exact moment the dog's eyes meet yours, and then following the click immediately with a treat. This teaches your dog that looking at you is immensely rewarding and your dog will likely look at you more frequently.

It's really convenient to make the cue for this behavior be the dog's name. Add the cue once your dog is immediately looking at you after he eats the treat. You're trying to slip his name in between when you give him the treat and when he looks right back up at you.

This is what it looks like:

Dog looks at you, you click and deliver the treat. Dog looks immediately back up at you, you click and deliver the treat. Before the dog finishes chewing, you say his name – once. He'll immediately look up at you, you click and deliver the treat. Say his name before he finishes chewing, and click the instant he looks at you. You've now got a word that means: Look at me!

Once you've got that cue established, it's time to introduce distractions, small ones at first, then gradually increasing those to real-life-sized distractions like a doorbell ringing. When the bell rings, you say your dog's name, he turns to look at you,

you give him the cue for "quiet," and then click and reward him for his beautifully quiet behavior!

Happy training!

Laurie Luck
Certified Pet Dog Trainer (CPDT)
Certified Training Partner – Karen Pryor Academy
[Smart Dog University, LLC](#)
Box 1111
Mount Airy, MD 21771
(240) 848-3468
laurie@smartdoguniversity.com
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