



Kingsbrook Animal Hospital

5322 New Design Road, Frederick, MD, 21703

Phone: (301) 631-6900

Website: KingsbrookVet.com

Barking in Dogs

Why do dogs bark?

Barking is one of the most common complaints of dog owners and their neighbors! But, for dogs, barking is natural. It can serve as a territorial warning signal to other dogs and pack members. Dogs may vocalize when separated from their pack or family members. Some dogs bark whenever they are exposed to novel or unusual stimuli whether they are sounds, sights or odors. Barking also occurs during times of indecision, anxiety, or frustration. Medical problems can also contribute to vocalization, especially in the older dog.



How can barking problems be prevented?

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The keys to preventing barking problems are socialization and habituation – get puppies used to as many new people, animals, situations and noises as possible. The more familiar the stimulus, the less likely that your dog will display anxiety induced barking. Socialization and habituation should also minimize the intensity or reduce the amount of alarm barking. Barking should only be allowed to alert owners and then be controlled and stopped before the dog becomes agitated and out of control. Owner control, training and leadership are essential (see our handout on 'Puppy – Training Basics').

How can I stop my dog barking when I leave?

Effective crate training techniques when your dog is first obtained should decrease the dog's anxiety when it is left alone in its crate (see our handout on 'Crate Training in Dogs'). Your dog should gradually be taught to spend longer periods of time away from you. Providing your dog with a consistent and predictable daily routine (see our handout on 'Training Dogs – Enrichment, Predictability and Scheduling') can help your dog to be calmer and more settled through the day. Also, by providing predictable consequences, you can insure that calm and quiet behavior is reinforced and that you never reinforce attention seeking behavior (which may escalate to barking).

When you obtain a new dog, having a second dog may greatly reduce distress vocalization at times when your dog cannot be with family members. DAP™, a synthetic pheromone, may also be helpful for calming and reducing vocalization. If your dog's excessive barking problem has been going on for some time, he may be suffering from separation anxiety. If this is the case, you should review our handout on separation anxiety, and consult your veterinarian for treatment options.

My dog constantly barks. What does she want?

Attention getting barking can be problematic and is often reinforced by owners giving in to their dog's demands. Examples of inadvertent reinforcement on the part of the owner include allowing a barking dog indoors, or feeding, patting, praising, playing with, giving a toy, or even just going to a barking dog to try and quiet it down.

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Never reward barking with any type of attention, even occasionally. Instead, reward and reinforce calm and quiet behaviors.

How can I train my dog to 'quiet down' on command?



"Training the dog to be "quiet" on command is an invaluable..."

Training the dog to be "quiet" on command is an invaluable aid for controlling undesirable barking. Many owners initially accept their dog's barking as normal or even desirable. However, the barking becomes problematic when it gets too loud, too frequent, or will not stop on command. In order to train the dog to quiet down on cue, you must find an effective means of quieting the dog, which should be preceded with a verbal command. Your dog will probably not understand what you want if you just loudly tell your pet to 'be quiet', especially if silence does not follow the verbal command. In fact, yelling may just add to the noise, anxiety and conflict, thereby encouraging your dog to bark even more.

One of the most practical techniques for teaching a dog to cease barking on command, is to teach barking on cue. Use a stimulus that will cause the dog to bark and pair it with a 'bark' command. Numerous repetitions allow the dog to associate the word 'bark' or 'speak' with the action. Dogs that bark on command can then be taught to turn off the barking by removing the cue or stimulus, and giving a 'hush' or 'quiet' command just before the barking subsides. As soon as your dog is quiet, give a favored treat or reward. It can be difficult or impractical to teach a dog to be 'quiet' on command if the barking cannot be predicted or 'turned on', or if it is too intense.

Another method to teach a "quiet" command is to wait until your dog is barking, for example in response to a doorbell. While he is barking, place a very tasty food treat by his nose. Most dogs will stop barking to sniff the treat. At the same time you must say the word you will use for quiet, such as 'silent', 'hush' etc. When the dog is quiet (which should happen because dogs cannot sniff and bark at the same time) you can praise your dog, say 'good quiet' and give the treat. Again, as with all new tasks, numerous repetitions are necessary for lasting learning.

Alternately, distraction or remote punishment devices (see below) can be used to disrupt the barking. One of the most effective means of interrupting barking and ensuring quiet is a remote leash and head halter. A pull on the leash disrupts the dog and closes the mouth, which should also coincide with a verbal command such as 'quiet' or 'hush'. By first releasing the dog, and then giving a reinforcer such as praise or food if the dog remains quiet, you can reinforce the quiet behavior. Soon the dog should associate the closed mouth and the verbal command with the absence of noise, and begin to stop barking when given the verbal prompt alone. For more details on 'Training Dogs - Head Halter Training' please see our handout).

How can I train my dog to be quiet without having to constantly tell him or her to quiet down?

The key is to reward the behavior that we want (i.e. quiet and settled) rather than to give any attention to the behavior we don't want (barking). Each time you pay attention to the barking dog, you may be able to quiet it down. However, when you are unsuccessful, you may actually be inadvertently rewarding the barking (by giving the dog attention or treats to quiet it down) or may be aggravating the problem with yelling and punishment (which can make the dog more anxious and more likely to bark). The goal of training should be to teach the dog what you want it to do (for rewards) rather than to try and teach it what NOT to do. By providing a daily routine that provides sufficient play, exercise and training, followed by set times where the dog is taught to settle and nap or play with its toys in a bedding area, your dog can be reinforced for quiet times, rather than for play soliciting, attention getting and barking behaviors.

What are my chances of correcting my dog's barking problem?

Chances are good for resolving most barking problems. However, in some cases, the household situation in which the dog resides may make it extremely difficult to correct completely or sufficiently. Even a small amount of barking could disturb a sleeping baby or upset neighbors (particularly in apartments or townhouses). When trying to resolve barking problems, the motivation for the barking behavior is an important component. Some stimuli are so strong that it will be difficult to stop the barking behavior. In addition, you need sufficient time to implement the correction training.

What can I do to correct my dog's barking problem?

The treatment program must be based on the type of problem, your household, the immediacy of the situation, and the type and level of control that you require. A good behavioral history is important to determine cause, motivation and potential reinforcing stimuli for the barking behavior. Treatment plans need to consider the following:

1. Ensure that your dog is not being rewarded inadvertently. Some owners in an attempt to calm their dog down will actually encourage the barking by giving attention, play, food or affection.
2. Ensure that your response is not aggravating the problem. For example, yelling or punishing a dog that is barking due to anxiety or as a territorial response is only likely to increase the dog's barking and anxiety.
3. Sometimes the home environment can be modified so that the dog is kept away from the stimuli (sounds and sights) that cause barking. Exposure might be minimized by confining the dog to a crate or a room away from doors and windows, or by covering windows so that the dog cannot look outside. It may also be possible to further mask or mute the sounds that stimulate barking by using a covered crate, music, CD or TV for background noise, or white noise devices. Privacy fencing may be helpful for dogs outdoors. Dogs that bark when left alone outdoors may have to be kept indoors except when the owner is outside to supervise. In some situations, the dog may be barking when alone outdoors due to separation anxiety and not because of stimuli such as people passing by or cars (See our handouts on 'Separation Anxiety in Dogs' for details on diagnosis and treatment) Trigger sounds such as doorbells or telephones that might have become conditioned stimuli for barking should be altered to change their sound.
4. Until effective control can be achieved using a reward based training program, it is unlikely that the dog will quiet down on cue. Increasing interactive play periods and exercise, crate and confinement training, head halter use and training classes may need to be implemented before bark control training can begin.

5. Once you have sufficient control and the dog responds to obedience commands and handling, it should be possible to train your dog to stop barking on command. Training the dog to cease barking on command can be accomplished with lure reward techniques, distraction techniques, or halter and leash training. Regardless of the technique, rewards should be given as soon as the barking stops, so that the dog learns that quiet behavior earns rewards. **It is most important to associate SILENCE with the command used.** Over time the behavior should be shaped so that the dog is required to stay quiet for progressively longer times, before a reward is given.

6. Once you have sufficient control with training and a quiet command, it should be possible to begin a retraining program in the presence of the stimuli (people, other dogs) that lead to barking. Training with a head halter and leash often provides a tool for implementing the techniques safely and effectively especially indoors or when the owner is nearby. The stimulus should first be presented to the dog from a distance (e.g. children riding bicycles on the street while the dog stands on its porch), and the dog given a quiet or sit-stay command. Although the halter and leash is generally all that is required to control the dog and achieve the appropriate response, the dog could also be disrupted automatically with a bark initiated spray collar or with a device such as an ultrasonic trainer or shake can. Training sessions are then repeated with progressively more intense stimuli. This type of training can be effective, but progress can be slow and time consuming. See 'Behavior Modification – Desensitization and Counterconditioning' and 'Behavior Modification – Implementing Desensitization and Counterconditioning' handouts for more details.

7. Pets that are barking for other reasons (fear, separation anxiety, or compulsive disorders) will require treatment for the underlying problem.

Should I punish my dog when she keeps barking?

Punishment is seldom effective in the control and correction of barking problems. Excessive levels of punishment can increase anxiety and further aggravate many forms of barking, while mild punishment merely rewards the behavior by providing attention.

What anti-barking devices are there and are they effective?

Owner-Activated Products: These products are most useful for getting the pet's attention (disruption) during quiet command training. Ultrasonic devices (Pet Agree™, Easy Trainer™), audible devices (Barker Breaker™), water sprayers, or a shake can (an empty soda can with a few coins or pebbles sealed inside) are often successful. However, without concurrent retraining techniques, many dogs will soon begin to ignore the devices. If the device is used to interrupt the barking and the quiet behavior is then reinforced, the pet may become less anxious and less likely to bark in the presence of the stimulus, or at least should quiet much faster on command.

Bark-Activated Products: When barking occurs in the owner's absence, bark activated products (in conjunction with environmental modification and retraining) are often the most practical means of deterring inappropriate barking.



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Bark-activated products may also be a better choice than owner-activated devices, since they ensure immediate and accurate timing. Off-collar devices are useful for training the dog to cease barking in selected areas, such as near doorways or windows, or for dogs that bark in their crate or pen. The Super Barker Breaker emits an audible alarm while the Yapper Zapper™ sprays a stream of water each time the dog barks.

Bark-Activated Collars are useful when barking does not occur in a predictable location. Audible and ultrasonic training collars are occasionally effective, but they are usually neither sufficiently unpleasant nor consistent enough to be a reliable deterrent. There are also collars (see our handout on 'Behavior Management Products') that emit a spray of air or citronella each time the dog barks that may be sufficiently unpleasant to interrupt the barking of some dogs. Although these collars may be effective for some dogs in the owner's absence, they may soon become ineffective without concurrent training. One problem is that barking that is highly motivated may be too intense, and the dog will bark despite of the spray. In addition, if the reservoir empties out or the battery "runs out", then the dog may learn to bark while wearing the collar and even when refilled the collar may no longer be effective.

"When using a citronella spray collar it is advisable that the owner be present so that as soon as the dog stops barking, the owner can direct the dog into an enjoyable pastime."

Therefore, when using a citronella spray collar it is advisable that the owner be present so that as soon as the dog stops barking, the owner can direct the dog into an enjoyable pastime (e.g. play, tummy rub, favorite treat) as long as the dog remains quiet. In this way, the quiet behavior is reinforced, and any anxiety about the stimulus (people coming to the door, people coming to the yard, other dogs) can be gradually reduced. In fact, in time some dogs may begin to associate the arrival of new people or other dogs with something positive (counterconditioning).

Most importantly, bark collars only work when they are on the dog. Most dogs will learn to distinguish when the collar is on and when it is off. When they are not wearing the collar, most dogs will bark.

Is debarking surgery effective?

Surgical debarking is a drastic and often permanent method of eliminating barking. However, varying degrees of vocalization may return as the surgical site heals and scars. Devocalization may need to be considered when owners are confronted with the option of immediately resolving a barking problem or having to give up their pet. However, all attempts at behavior modification should be continued to try and address the underlying motivation for barking and perhaps result in a permanent solution.

This client information sheet is based on material written by: Debra Horwitz, DVM, Diplomate ACVB & Gary Landsberg, DVM, Diplomate ACVB

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