



# DOG TRAINING SOLUTIONS

## Barking dogs – Understanding it and dealing with it

Some owners seem to want their dogs to stop barking, *period*: a good dog is a quiet dog, and the only time that barking is permitted is when there's a man in a black balaclava and stripy prison outfit, clutching a haversack marked 'Swag', clambering in through your bedroom window.

Dogs don't see barking in quite the same light. Your dog has a voice, just like you do, and she uses it just how you do too: to communicate something to the people she cares about.

I don't think that barking is necessarily a bad thing – in fact, I think it's encouraging that my dog wants to "talk" to me, enough so that I can overlook the stentorian qualities of his voice (which, in enclosed spaces, is positively overpowering) in favour of his desire to communicate with me. It's the thought that counts (even though I feel better-equipped to stand by this sanctimonious belief when my ears are sheltered safely behind industrial-quality ear-plugs).

Unfortunately, the language barrier between dogs and humans is pretty well impermeable, which means it's up to us to use the context, the body language of our dogs, and the circumstances of the vocalization to parse meaning from a volley of barks.

So why *do* dogs bark? It's not easy to say (it's like trying to answer the question, "Why do humans talk?" in so many words). Let's start off by saying that dogs bark for many different reasons.

A lot of it depends on the breed: some dogs were bred to bark only when a threat is perceived (this is true of guarding breeds in particular, like Rottweilers, Dobermans, and German Shepherds); some were bred to use their voices as a tool of sorts, to assist their owners in pursuit of a common goal (sporting breeds such as Beagles and Bloodhounds, trained to 'bay' when they scent the quarry), and some dogs just like to hear themselves talk (take just about any of the toy breeds as an example of a readily-articulate dog!).

However, all breed specificities cast aside, there are some circumstances where just about any dog will give voice:

- She's bored
- She's lonely
- She's hungry, or knows it's time for a meal
- Something is wrong/someone is near the house
- She's inviting you to play
- She sees another animal
- She needs the toilet

If your dog is barking for any of these reasons, it's not really realistic for you to try to stop her: after all, she's a dog, and it's the nature of all dogs to bark at certain times and in certain situations. Presumably you were aware of this when you adopted your friend (and, if total silence was high on your list of priorities, you'd have bought a pet rock, right?).

Of course, there are times when barking isn't only unwarranted, it's downright undesirable. Some dogs can use their voices as a means of manipulation. Take this situation as an example:

You're lying on the couch reading a book. Your dog awakes from a nap and decides it's time for a game. She picks up her ball, comes over, and drops it in your lap. You ignore her and keep on reading. After a second of puzzled silence, she nudges your hand with her nose and barks once, loudly. You look over at her – she assumes the 'play-bow' position (elbows near the floor, bottom in the air, tail waving) and pants enticingly at you. You return to your book. She barks again, loudly – and, when no response is elicited, barks again. And this time, she keeps it up. After a minute or so of this, sighing, you put down your book (peace and quiet is evidently not going to be a component of your evening, after all), pick up the ball, and take her outside for a game of fetch. She stops barking immediately.

I'm sure you know that respect is an essential part of your relationship with your dog. You respect her, which you demonstrate by taking good care of her regardless of the convenience of doing so, feeding her nutritious and tasty food, and showing your affection for her in ways that she understands and enjoys.

In order for her to be worthy of your respect, she has to respect you, too. Something that many kind-hearted souls struggle to come to terms with is that dog ownership is not about equality: it's about *you* being the boss, and *her* being the pet. Dogs are not children; they are most comfortable and best behaved when they know that you are in charge. A dog has to respect your leadership to be a happy, well-adjusted, and well-behaved pet.

In the situation above, there was no respect being shown by the dog. She wasn't *inviting* her owner to play; she was *harassing* her owner to play. In fact, I'd even say *bullying*. And even worse, the behaviour was being reinforced by the owner's capitulation – effectively, giving in to this behaviour taught her that to get what she wants, she has to make a noise – and she has to keep it up until her goal is achieved.

Affection and playtimes are obviously necessary aspects of life with a dog, but they have to be doled out on your own terms. If she learns that she can get what she wants by barking, then your house is going to become a Noise Pollution Zone (and this is not going to endear you to your neighbours, either).

To prevent this bullying behaviour in your dog from assuming a familiar role in her repertoire of communications, you have to prove to her that you're not the kind of person that can be manipulated so easily. It's simple to do this: all you have to do is *ignore her*. I'm not talking about passive ignorance, where you pay her no attention and simply continue with whatever it was you were doing – you need to take more of an active role. This means conveying to her through your body language that she is not worthy of your attention when she acts in such an undesirable manner.

The absolute best and most effective thing for you to do in this case is to give her the cold shoulder. When she starts trying to 'bark you' into doing something for her, turn your back on her straight away. Get up, avert your eyes and face, and turn around so your back is towards her. Don't look at her, and don't talk to her – not even a "no".

She'll probably be confused by this, and will likely bark harder. This is particularly true if you've given in to her bully-barking in the past – the more times you've reinforced the behaviour, the more persistent she's going to be. In fact, the barking will almost certainly get a lot worse before it gets better – after all, it's worked for her the past, so it's understandable that she'll expect it to work again.

As in all aspects of dog training, consistency is very important. You must ensure that you don't change your mind halfway through and give in to what she wants – because by doing so, you're teaching her to be really, *really* persistent (“OK, so I just need to bark for *ten* minutes instead of five to get a walk,” is the message she'll get).

But what can you do in other situations where bullying isn't an issue and you just want her to stop the racket? If you want to get the message across that you'd like her to cease-fire and be quiet, the most effective thing you can do is to use your hands.

No, I'm not talking about hitting her: this is a perfectly humane, impact- and pain-free method of conveying that what you require right now is peace and quiet.

Here's what you do: when she's barking, give her a second to 'get it out of her system' (it's a lot kinder, and a lot more effective, to give her a chance - however brief – to express herself before asking her to be quiet). If she doesn't calm down under her own steam, reach out and clasp her muzzle gently, but firmly, in your hand. She'll try to shake you off, or back away, so you can place your other hand on her collar to give you greater control.

This method is useful for two reasons: firstly, it effectively silences the barking (since no dog, no matter how loud, can bark with her mouth shut!). Secondly, it reinforces your authority: you're showing her through direct physical action that you're a benevolent but firm leader who will brook no nonsense, and who won't balk when it comes to enforcing your guidance.

Hold onto her muzzle and collar until she's stopped trying to break free: only when she calms down and stops wriggling does it mean that she's accepted your authority. When she's still, hold on for one or two more seconds, then let her go and praise her.

In addition to this short-term fix, there are also a few things you can do to reduce your dog's need to bark in the first place.

The number-one cause for unwanted barking (as in, the kind of barking that's repetitive and is directed at nothing) is nervous, agitated energy – the kind she gets from not getting enough exercise. Most dogs function best with one and a half hours' exercise *every day*, which is a considerable time commitment for you. Of course, this varies from dog to dog, depending on factors like breed, age, and general level of health. You may think that your dog is getting as much exercise as she needs, or at least as much as you can possibly afford to give her – but if her barking is coupled with an agitated demeanour (fidgeting, perhaps acting more aggressively than you'd expect or want, restlessness, destructive behaviour) then she almost definitely needs more.

Fortunately, the fix for this problem is pretty simple: you'll just have to exercise her more. Try getting up a half-hour earlier in the morning – it'll make a big difference. If this is absolutely impossible, consider hiring someone to walk her in the mornings and/or evenings. And if this is impossible too, then you'll just have to resign yourself to having a loud, frustrated, and agitated dog (although whether you can resign *her* to this state remains to be seen).

The second most common cause of excessive vocalization in dogs is too much 'alone time'. Dogs are social animals: they need lots of attention, lots of interaction, and lots of

communication. Without these things, they become anxious and on edge. If you're at home with your dog, you're not paying attention to her, and she's spending a lot of time barking at what appears to be nothing, she's probably bored and lonely and would benefit from a healthy dose of affection and attention.

*Recommended reading*

If you'd like more information on unwanted behaviours that your dog's exhibiting, you'll probably be interested in taking a look at SitStayFetch. It's a complete, A-Z manual for the responsible dog owner, and deals with recognizing, preventing, and dealing with just about every problem dog behaviour under the sun.

You can check out SitStayFetch by clicking on the link below:

<http://www.kingdomofpets.com/dogobediencetraining/index.php?aff=cbdtol608&type=barking>