



Managing and Working with Attention Barking

Understanding Attention Barking

Dogs bark to communicate and while it can be a nuisance for us at times, it's important to understand that this is a natural behavior for dogs and is often accidentally reinforced daily by the world around them. Look for clues in the environment and patterns in behavior to help you understand what might be reinforcing your dog for barking. Sometimes owners find barking to be desirable in some situations but problematic in others that likely feel similar to the dog. Two examples might be a puppy barking to alert their owner they need to go potty vs. a dog barking for their owner to feed them a meal when they are hungry. For this reason, it's critical we be gentle, patient, and consistent as you work to teach them when it may be appropriate to bark and when it may not. These guidelines will help address attention seeking barking only but not barking that may be due to stress, fear or anxiety. For those situations, see when "When to Seek Additional Help" section.

Modifying Barking Behaviors

Setting them up for Success

The following guidelines can help prevent the behaviors from happening in the first place and will set you and your dog up for success.

- **Provide enrichment-** Under stimulation or boredom can often cause or exacerbate behavior issues, especially things like barking or inappropriate chewing. Be sure to provide more than enough things for your dog to do so they have alternative options available to them to keep themselves busy instead of asking you for attention or help staying occupied. Keep items rotated so they stay novel and interesting.
- **Reinforce calm and quiet**
 - Make a point to reinforce them when they are quiet or calm. Begin play sessions, praise, or give your dog a treat every time you see them resting calmly or relaxing.
 - Give your dog a treat when they are quiet in situations where they have barked in the past. As you begin, be sure to reward for even the smallest moments of silence. Catching them and rewarding them when they are not barking is the key to success. Once your dog has started to learn that they are rewarded for calm or quiet behavior, you can start to extend the amount of time between treats or rewards.
 - Keep some treats and toys nearby so you can use everyday opportunities to work on barking and reinforce quiet, calm behaviors. It can take some practice to stop what you're doing when your dog isn't prompting you to engage with them, but try to initiate petting, playing or going for a walk when your dog is resting quietly or playing by themselves.

If Your Dog Barks

The primary way to modify these behaviors are to manage the environment and catch and reward all quiet, calm attempts so solicit attention. However, if your dog does start to bark for attention, we want to avoid reinforcing those behaviors, even inadvertently. Here are some strategies that will help you may find helpful. If you see signs of anxiety or your dog's frustration increasing, you should look to modify your plan.

- **Take notes**- Take notes about when, where, and why your dog started barking for attention so you can modify your plan to ensure you can reduce the difficulty and set them up for success the next time.
- **Walk away**- Refrain from giving your dog attention (talking to, looking at, playing with or touching) while they are barking. Any attention, even attention from punishment, further reinforces the behavior and will cause it to increase overall.
- **Be calm and consistent**- Be careful not to give in if the barking becomes incessant. If your dog barks for 5 minutes and you get frustrated and throw the toy, your dog has learned that to get your attention they must bark at least 5 minutes.
- **Be consistent**- Be sure everyone in the household knows the plan. The more consistent everyone is, the faster the dog will learn and the less time it will take to resolve.
- **Be patient**- Remember that if the animal has learned over time that this works, someone or something has likely inadvertently taught them that the behavior is desirable or reinforcing. Remember that it might take a while for your dog to learn not to bark, especially if the behavior has been heavily reinforced or they have practiced the behavior for a long period of time.

When to Seek Additional Help

If you believe your dog is barking for attention or out of boredom, these guidelines can be helpful. However, if your dog is showing any signs of fear, aggression or is barking at dogs, other animals, or when you leave the house, there may be an underlying issue that you need to resolve first. In those cases, you should consult with a Certified Veterinary Behaviorist and/or a Certified Professional Dog Trainer so they can evaluate your situation and get you a plan that is appropriate for you and your pet.

The two main organizations where you can search a database to find certified trainers near you is the Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers or the International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants. If you are seeing more severe signs of distress listed above and are looking for a Board-Certified Veterinary Behaviorist, you should search the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists website to search for the closest behaviorist near you.