

For Bark's Sake!

Living in the city, I hear dogs barking pretty much all day; dogs barking while on a walk, from nearby parks and from inside their home. When I'm with fellow dog trainers, we like to try to guess what breed the barking dog is, and what it's trying to say, based on the pitch and tone of their bark.

However, most people think barking is annoying, not interesting. Barking is the number one complaint about dogs in the city, especially in condos or apartments. This has caused a rise in shock, vibration and citronella collar use, because people are desperate to find a quick fix to avoid complaints and even eviction.

But here's the thing; a dog's bark always has a purpose and, if we suppress their communication, this can cause a new, worse behavior. I once worked with a new rescue living in a condo. My clients received several complaints that the dog was barking while they were at work. They got a citronella collar that sprayed every time the dog barked. The dog stopped barking but ripped apart their couch instead!

By understanding the reason behind the bark, we can apply useful, positive techniques to decrease it. Before you consider any sort of training, ensure that your dog's basic needs such as water, food, and when they need to eliminate are being met. Then, is your dog getting enough and balanced physical and mental stimulation every day? Running your dog three or four times a day may not satisfy the mental needs they have. Providing the right balance of needs can sometimes eliminate the barking.

But dogs love to bark – it's communication! Although there are many reasons why dogs bark, the following are the three most "problematic":

Alert Barking:

What your dog is saying: "Did you hear that? Did you see that? Should we do something?"

Many dogs, especially guardian breeds, enjoy alerting their people that there is something going on. This can be fun and intrinsically rewarding to certain dogs.

How to tell it's alert barking:

- Head up in the air
- They will usually look to you (even from the corner of their eye) to ensure you are noticing
- Tail is often wagging in the middle
- Ears will be in the middle or back
- Happens mostly when you are home
- Dog is easily redirected

What it typically sounds like:

- A medium to low bark, sometimes with a growl or a whine
- There are usually breaks between barks, to listen or wait for your response.
- Often you might hear a “woo” sound in the barks

What can we do? Recognize and Redirect

I teach a cue such as “it’s ok!” or “Thank you!” that signals a dog to stop and relax. If your dog is alert barking, say your cue words and then lure your dog away from the door, ask for a sit or a down and reward when your dog is calm. Waiting for calm is key because smart dogs may think you are rewarding the barking! Each time you practice, try saying your cue farther and farther away from your dog so that “Thank you!” means come find me and relax for your treat. Then you can fade the food by rewarding some of the time until “Thank you” becomes an automatic redirect and relax cue. Here is a video example:

<https://1drv.ms/v/s!AtbFr0Aly4vCriU810tXuDGsH1dd?e=wTdp6>

Demand Barking

What your dog is saying: “I want something; food, play, outside, attention, etc.”

Dogs train us very easily, especially when it comes to demand behaviors. We often give into demand barking because we want it to stop, unknowingly reinforcing that behavior just with attention “hey, stop that!”.

How to tell it’s demand barking:

- Dog is around the thing they want
- Barking, jumping up, with their head up, looking at you in the eye
- Sometimes back to item they want to ensure you're paying attention
- Tail is slowly wagging

What it typically sounds like:

- Medium to high pitch
- Long pauses between barks
- Usually quite loud
- It sounds the equivalent of “hey! Hey!”

What can we do? Ignore & Walk Away

Literally turn around and walk away. No eye contact, no speaking, no touching. Sounds easy right? Just ignore my dog’s demand barking (unless they need to go outside or are sick of

course!). But, because this worked before, many dogs will bark louder and harder before the barking stops. This is called an extinction burst and means that it is working, even though it might be driving you a little crazy. If you live in a condo, you might want to warn your neighbours that things may be a little louder for a few days while you take care of this issue. Once your dog is calm, then you can come back, ask for a different cue such as a touch or a down, and if you know what they want, you can give it to them. Here is a great article about demand barking: <https://www.whole-dog-journal.com/behavior/demand-behavior/demand-behaviors-in-dogs/>

Fear Barking

What your dog is saying: “I hear or see something that is really scaring me, and I am barking to make it go away.”

A dog’s first defense is their bark, so if your dog is barking at particular things or noises, you can help your dog overcome the fear of those things. Some rescues might bark at everything in the beginning because they aren’t sure what anything is.

How to tell it’s fear barking:

- Body will be stiff, and head lowered
- Back legs splayed – ready to fight or flee
- Whites of eyes will show
- Teeth may show
- Hackles up
- Tail tucked or high with a stiff wag
- Very difficult to get their attention
- Will bark at things when you aren’t home

What it typically sounds like:

- Barking very quickly and menacingly
- Short low growls in between - "bark, growl, bark, bark, growl"
- Continues until threat is gone, and often a minute or two afterwards

What can we do? Minimize Stress & Create Positive Associations with Scary Things

If your dog has a generalized fear, meaning your dog is fear barking at everything, it is important to minimize exposure to these things as much as possible while you are helping your dog gain confidence. For sounds, you can minimize them inside with fans or white noise. If your dog is afraid of things, dogs or people outside, you may have to shorten walks as you are training.

Creating positive associations can take time and practice. Make a list of things that your dog is afraid of and work on them one by one, slowly and carefully. Here are some videos to give you an idea of how counter conditioning works:

Creating a positive association with brooms and vacuums:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zIZmJlIP7Y>

To create positive associations with certain sounds, start at a very, very low volume and pair the sound with something WONDERFUL like your dog's favorite game or favorite food. As your dog is enjoying, you can slowly increase the volume. Only do this for a few minutes. Each time you start your training session, the sound should start off a little higher each time. If your dog will not play or eat, you have gone too high too soon and need to start three notches lower. Here is a video to demonstrate:

<https://1drv.ms/v/s!AtbFr0Aly4vCOWkuwewyTI2mDynM?e=G6RcZ>

If we really listen to our dogs and figure out what they are trying to communicate, this is not only the fastest, longest lasting route to change, but to a wonderful relationship with your dog.



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In addition to the certifications above, Andrea is certified through the Karen Pryor Foundations and Kids Around Dogs, and she has also taken the Masters Course in Dog Aggression through AggressiveDog.com. She is the founder of EduCanine and City Dogs Training & Behavior and also created "The Rescue Plan."