

BARKING

Does your dog drive you and/or your neighbours crazy?

First you need to work out why they are barking in the first place, otherwise you are often treating the symptoms rather than the cause. There may be more than one reason but once you have worked this out it is easier to pick the right method for the situation.

Why do dogs bark?

- 1) **Communication:** barking/howling is one of the oldest methods of canine communication. It gives us and other animals an idea of how they might be feeling about a particular situation.
- 2) **Attention:** dogs learn very early in life that if they bark we will acknowledge them. The more we do this, the more dogs will vocalise for us to feed them, pat them, play with them, etc.
- 3) **Stress:** If a dog is anxious they will often bark/howl in an effort to relocate their 'pack' or let their 'pack' know that something is wrong
- 4) **Boredom:** Barking actually releases endorphins in to the body in the same way laughter does for humans, so barking is self-reinforcing. If dogs don't have things to occupy themselves during the day they can become hooked on barking on anything and everything that moves, just because it feels good.
- 5) **Warn off potential threats:** "Woof, I'm a big tough dog so don't come near me, woof!"



So how do I stop it?

- 1) **Confinement** – If your dog is barking because something is stimulating them to do so e.g. people walking past, possums, etc then try limiting their access to these stimuli by confining the dog in a crate, pen, room, dog run or half yard during the most annoying times. This is a very handy and easy technique to prevent dogs from barking at night. While this technique doesn't teach them not to bark, it is a management strategy used to encourage calmer behaviours from the dog, especially when you're not present i.e. at work or asleep. This works better when you accompany it with enrichment.



- 2) **Classical conditioning** – Remember Pavlov's dog? Pavlov studied the food related drooling behaviour of dogs. He would ring a bell and present food to them. As a natural behaviour, the dogs would then start salivating. After a few sessions of pairing the two activities, Pavlov tried ringing the bell without food. Because the dogs had begun to associate the bell with food, they automatically started drooling. Put simply, how many of you grab some coins and go running out to the street when you hear the jingle of the ice-cream van? With this in mind, when your dog's agitator appears (eg postie, dog walking past, cat, possum, children, etc) throw some treats/dried food/favourite toy/bone/daily ration at your dog's feet. If you do this often enough, every time the agitator appears, instead of barking at it "Go away, I'm a big tough dog", your dog will go looking for those special items you have been throwing their way and thinking "Gee I love that postie, I wish they'd come more often so I can get more special treats".



- 3) **Distraction & redirection** - If you catch them in the act of an unwanted behaviour, distract them by clapping, whistling, slapping your thighs, shouting "Yoo Hoo" or "Oi" (high pitched noises tend to get their attention without scaring them) and redirect the dogs focus onto some other activity, like fetch or chewing on a bone. They are not being rewarded for their unwanted behaviour, they are being rewarded for stopping what they are doing and coming over to you (and it's important you do reward them otherwise the next time you make that noise they won't bother responding).

- 4) Enrichment - Opportunities to chew, eliminate, play, eat, sleep peacefully, etc, are all normal behavioural needs of dogs. Trying to stop normal behaviours from happening will only redirect that energy onto another (usually more annoying/destructive)



behaviour such as barking. Managing these behaviours through proper enrichment can actually help you and Fido come to a happy medium, where they get to be a dog and you can enjoy their company. Just giving them a handful of toys is not the answer. Variety is the spice of life (as they say), so you need to have a range of toys and activities for your dog that you chop and change on a regular basis to keep them on their toes. Think outside the square and give them things that stimulate them rather than toys that just sit around doing nothing. The more you stimulate their mind the more likely you are to tire a dog out.

- 5) Ignore - Your attention is the most commonly desired reward so if they are barking at you try 'taking yourself away' or ignoring your dog until they behave in the desired manner. This means don't talk, touch or even look at them (even if it means you have to turn your back and walk away) until they behave appropriately. Make sure you reward the appropriate behaviour otherwise you are technically ignoring the good stuff too. You must be consistent at taking away your attention/toy every time the dog misbehaves otherwise you'll only confuse them and they won't work out what's ok and what's not.
- 6) Teach "Shh" – You can actually teach the dog what "shh" means. Talk to a trainer before trying this one to make sure it is done properly. This technique is not commonly used, however, as it can turn the dog into a compulsive barker when they show you that they can bark but shh when you tell them to.

What not to do:

- 1) yell at the dog – you're just joining in or taking over
- 2) smack/kick/whack the dog/grab the dog by the scruff of the neck – apart from the fact that this is inhumane, your dog will just become scared of you and will more than likely become hand shy
- 3) throw something at or near the dog – the dog will either become scared of you or even more scared of whatever it is they are barking at in the first place.
- 4) use electric pulse/citronella collars – this is no different to smacking a child for doing something wrong and can have some serious side effects.
- 5) remove the dog's vocal chords – this practice is cruel and doesn't actually stop the dog from barking, it merely makes the noise raspy.
- 6) Flood the dog (making it stay with the stimulus until it 'gets over it' and stops barking) - this technique can be time consuming, is cruel and can make matters worse if used incorrectly.



The 'what not to do' methods may seem to work, but they are just forms of bullying and have the potential to create either a fearful dog or an aggressive one. Dogs learn by association, so if something bad/scary happens every time their agitator appears (whether it be children, grandparents, a puppy etc) they are going to hate them even more. Furthermore, if they are barking to indicate that they are not comfortable and they get into trouble for doing so, then next time they might not give you any warning and just go straight to attack mode.

The worst part about punishment is that it needs to be 'bad' enough that your dog stops barking to avoid it. Not only can this be cruel and dangerous (violence begets violence) but it doesn't work for all dogs. How many of you still speed after getting a speeding ticket or play with fire after being burnt or continued to misbehave at school despite getting a detention? It depends on the dog's motivation/determination to do these activities and the dog's tolerance to the form of punishment used. Besides, punishment just teaches the dog what not to do rather than what they should do. It's much more efficient to teach them what's right in the first place.

