

Dogs bark for a variety of reasons:

1. **Watchdog Barking** serves the dual purpose of alerting pack members that there is an intruder and warning the intruder that they have been noticed.
2. **Request Barking** is the dog's way of communicating to the owner that he would like something NOW. Typical requests are "open the door NOW", "pay attention to me NOW", "let me out NOW", or "I want to see that dog NOW" etc...
3. **Spooky Barking** occurs when the dog is uncomfortable about something in the environment and barks to say, "I'm dangerous! Don't come any closer!"
4. **Boredom Barking** can result when the dog's daily need for exercise and social stimulation are not met. The dog is essentially barking out of boredom.

## HOW TO CONTROL BARKING

There are exercises that can help with the different forms of barking. The following information highlights some of the basic ideas behind bark control.

### 1. WATCH DOG BARKING

The goal is to teach the dog the meaning of the words "bark" and "quiet" (or any word you want to use as an "off" switch). First, you have to teach the dog to bark and stop on command as a trick. To practice, encourage the dog to bark using something that you know will trigger the dog to bark, e.g. the doorbell or a noise outside (you may need a helper). Arrange the following sequence:

1. The doorbell rings (or another prompt that causes barking)
2. Use your command "bark"
3. The dog barks
4. Praise from you - "good bark"
5. Use your command "quiet"
6. Show him the treat
7. He eventually becomes distracted from barking by the treat
8. 3-5 seconds of quiet during which you praise, using "Gooo-ood quiet"
9. Give him the treat after 3-5 seconds of perfect quiet
10. Repeat, gradually lengthening the duration of the "quiet" up to a minute

Do this over and over until the dog knows the game. You will know that he understands the game when he barks on command, doesn't need the doorbell anymore, and he quiets on the first quiet command you give without having to be shown the treat (you still give him one from your pocket - just don't show it anymore). If he ever interrupts a quiet with even one

bark, say "Oh! Too bad" and start counting the quiet time from the beginning again. Barking during the quiet time will cost him the treat.

You must be able to control the dog reliably between bark and quiet before you try out your "quiet" in real situations. The most common mistake is to use the quiet command before it is well conditioned enough in training sessions. Think of "quiet" on command as a muscle you're making stronger.

When you can turn barking on and off anytime, anywhere as a trick, you may now start to command quiet after a few barks when your dog barks on his own in real life situations. The first few times the dog will respond poorly to the command. Don't give up. Have really good treats handy. Go back to showing him the treat up front the first few times. Practice makes perfect.

If your dog "goes off" for the smallest sounds and changes in the environment, it would help to get him better habituated. Take him out more, invite people and dogs over to socialise, and expose him to a wider range of sights and sounds. Try and improve his association with those things by using treats whenever he behaves well around them.

## 2. REQUEST BARKING

When they want something, dogs will experiment with various behaviours to see if any of them work. They quickly work out that barking works with their owners. If you don't like barking, stop rewarding it with attention or opening the door etc.

Rather than the dog telling you when to take him out, you take him out at regular intervals, making sure he has not barked before you allow him out. Ignore your dog if he barks at you. Wait until he is quiet and then continue. Keep in mind that if you have been rewarding the behaviour for a while, the barking will get worse before it gets better and finally stops. You are changing the rules and the dog will be frustrated at first. Whatever you do, don't crack or you will never break the bark habit otherwise.

Above all, start noticing the dog when he is quiet. Praise him and give him rewards for lying quietly, chewing on a chew-toy and refraining from barking.

Barking when alone is a common form of request barking. The dog is requesting that you come back. There is often a level of anxiety involved as well. When you get a new dog or puppy, set a good precedent right away. Do not smother him with your constant presence and attention. Come and go a lot and never go to him when he is barking. Wait until he is quiet for at least 30 seconds so there is no risk that you reward his barking.

**If your dog has already has a habit of barking when left alone, you must work to change the behaviour.**

- a. When you are at home, do not let your dog shadow you around. Confine him in various rooms away from you and practice short absences. Ignore any barking as this is a more powerful tool than reprimanding. Remember that he is barking to get you to go back and with some dogs, a reprimand is better than nothing. Do not fall into the trap! Wait until he is quiet and then go back.
- b. Practice many, many brief absences every day. Go out and come back after 2 or 3 seconds over and over to get the dog desensitised to your departures. Do it in a matter of fact way, more or less ignoring the dog no matter what he does. Then do outings of 10 seconds, 30, and minute, 10 minutes etc... Mix it up. Dogs who are anxious need to learn that your departure does not usually mean a traumatically long period of isolation. Keep all your departure and arrival greetings low key. Never enter when the dog is barking. Wait for a lull of at least 30 seconds.
- c. Dogs are a highly social species. They do not cope well with prolonged periods of isolation. Consider bringing your dog to work, or using a dog-sitter or a dog-walker at lunchtime if you work all day. In some cases, acquiring a second dog may help. Please consult your trainer.
- d. Increase physical and mental stimulation. In the wild, a lot of your dog's energy would be spent acquiring food. He would have to find prey, chase it, hang on to it, kill it and then rip it apart to eat it. He would have to attempt several finds and chases before he makes a successful kill.

## **HOW TO STIMULATE YOUR DOG**

- Tire him out more before long absences. Walks alone are not sufficient as exercise for dogs. Most dogs like getting out and checking out the environment but this is not exercise. **Exercise means exertion.** Start working your dog out with high-intensity games like ball-fetch (for food rewards initially), Frisbee, tug-of-war, hide and seek, free-play with other dogs etc.
- Make him work to acquire his food. When you are out, hide food around the house and/or garden, make him extract it from the hollow of a bone or Kong (which you also hide). Your absences can come to mean that his meal is hidden around the house so that he has to get busy when you leave if he wants to eat. Dogs are programmed to work for their food.
- Without these kinds of outlets your dog can become bored and the under-stimulation can make barking worse.  
When you are there, make him earn his food piece by piece for obedience exercises and tricks or make him solve problems.

- Get him more focused on toys by incorporating them when you play with him. Show an interest in his toys. Teach him to find a toy that you have hidden in the room and then celebrate his find with tug-of-war or fetch. Teach him his toys by name.
- Once he knows his toys by name, make him bring you one when you come home. Do not greet him until he has brought it. Then have a vigorous game of fetch. Leave him stuffed chew toys during absences. Fill hollow bones or Kongs with cheese, peanut butter, kibble or combinations of these.
- NOTE: If your dog is barking and anxious to the point of panic, he may have severe separation anxiety and need formal desensitisation and/or medication. Speak to a behaviourist, trainer or vet for more information.

### 3. SPOOKY BARKING

In this case, it is important to get at the underlying under-socialisation. Socialise puppies extensively to as wide a variety of people and dogs as possible. You cannot overdo it! Expose them to plenty of places, experiences, sights and sounds and make it all fun with praise, games and treats. Find and attend a good puppy class.

If you missed the chance of socialising your puppy, you will have to do remedial work with your adolescent or adult. Whatever it is that spooks your dog must now become associated with food. This is how under-socialised dogs work for their food in this manner. If he does not like strangers, meals need to be fed bit by bit around strangers until he improves. If he is spooky around traffic, hand feed him his meal on the pavement, one handful each time a car passes. It takes a while to re-socialise adults so be very patient.

### 4. BOREDOM BARKING

If you do not have time for a dog, do not get a dog! Dogs are not space consuming - they are time consuming. If you have an outside dog, train him to be an inside dog and become part of the family. There is no basic quick fix here. You must meet your dog's basic needs for stimulation, exercise and companionship. 🐾

*The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) is a non-profit organisation dedicated to make Hong Kong a kinder environment for animals. Because we are not a Government Department and animal charities do not qualify for membership in the Community Chest, we must rely on YOU. Please consider all of the animals in need of food, shelter, and medical care and help us make a difference in their lives.*