

## What is your dog telling you?

Although barking may be irritating or annoying to you or your neighbours it's vital you understand why dogs bark before you try to stop them.

### Top Tips:

- 🐾 Remember to avoid shouting or punishing your dog for barking as this may make matters worse.
- 🐾 Identify the triggers that initiate the barking and avoid them to begin with.
- 🐾 Understand the dog's motivation for barking as this will shape how you treat the undesirable behaviour.
- 🐾 Do not be confrontational with a dog that is barking as you could cause an aggressive response.
- 🐾 Reward desired behaviour and, initially, ignore the undesirable behaviour.
- 🐾 Often changes to the dog's routine or exercise regime can have a positive impact on barking.
- 🐾 Read the detailed advice in the rest of this factsheet for further help.



### **What is your dog telling you?**

A lot of dogs like to bark and most of the time they're trying to tell us something! Sometimes, however, a dog may bark a lot, disturbing neighbours, keeping you awake at night or frightening visitors to your home. You don't want to get into trouble because of your dog's barking – so what can you do?

The first thing to do is to try to work out why your dog is barking. If you can remove the cause, he should stop, although perhaps a bit of training may also be needed.

As each case is different, we can only make suggestions and some guidelines which we hope will be useful, however, for accurate advice you may need to contact a reputable behaviour specialist.

**Your dog could be barking because he is excited, frustrated, guarding, bored, scared or because he cannot cope with being on his own.**

**If he is excited** he will probably bark when visitors call, when you get his lead to go for a walk and when you make his dinner. He may also jump around and act like a 'hooligan'!

- If he is excited because the rest of his day is so boring and quiet, try introducing some interesting activities into his routine. Try clicker training and simple puzzle-solving games (i.e. find the treat under a cup) and take him out more often during the day for calm walks with plenty of sniffing allowed. Keep interactions calm with plenty of gentle praise and rewards – the idea is to exercise his mind, more so than his body.
- Brush up on his obedience training and train him to go and fetch a rubber ball or soft toy in his mouth. If you command him to do this every time he starts barking, he'll soon automatically do this – barking is a lot harder and quieter if a dog already has something in his mouth! Remember that asking a dog to do an alternative acceptable behaviour is far easier than asking him to completely stop an unwanted behaviour.
- You could try exposing him to the barking 'triggers' repeatedly over a few days, ignoring his reaction and then praising/rewarding him as soon as he quiets down – but this can be a long and annoying process that may not work very well!
- Remember – don't shout at him to stop barking as he may think that you are excited too and are joining in! This could make him bark even more loudly.

**If he is frustrated** he will be barking because he can't get to something that he finds exciting. Perhaps he's seen a cat in the garden, children playing on the street or can hear another dog barking next door. He may also scratch at the door or garden gate, or jump up at the windows in an effort to get closer.

- Find out what is making him bark and then, if you can, prevent him from seeing, hearing or smelling it. If you're going out, close the curtains and put the radio or television on to drown out offending noises.
- Don't leave your dog alone for long periods in the garden, if this is where he does most of his barking. Play more games with him, so he'll be too busy to bark.
- You could try getting him used to the sounds by recording them and playing them back at low volumes during times when he is already quiet and relaxed. Give him treats and lots of praise if and when he stays relaxed.
- Alternatively, brush up on your basic training and have sessions where you ask for sits, downs and stands in a random manner, using lots of treats and praise, at times when the triggers are present. This will help train your dog to be focussed on you, rather than the distractions.
- Unneutered male dogs can smell a bitch in season up to 6 miles away. If this is contributing to the problem, consider talking to your vet about the possibility of castration.
- If your dog is hungry (i.e. if he only has one meal a day), frustration and guarding behaviour (see below) can become worse. Make sure your dog has plenty to eat throughout the day – several smaller meals are far better than one large meal.

**If he is guarding** he will be barking to protect himself and his family, or to alert you to potential threats. He may also wag his tail and appear to be excited. Guarding behaviour should stop once the 'threat' has gone – e.g. once you have answered the doorbell and he recognises the visitor as a friend. Your dog may be a guarding 'breed' or crossbreed, or he may have been encouraged to bark at the doorbell from an early age.

- Provide your dog with a mat or a bed and place it as far away from the door as possible. At quiet times, teach your dog to lay down on his mat, using a new command word, e.g. “mat!” and using lots of really tasty treats. Repeat this often until you are able to use the command word from another room, and he’ll run to his mat to wait for his treat.
- Now ask a friend to help by ringing the doorbell. Send your dog to the mat and give him lots of praise and rewards when he lies in the correct place. Repeat this several times until he gets the idea. You’ll know when this is, when he goes to his mat and lays down without being told, whenever the doorbell rings.
- If you are worried that your dog’s guarding behaviour may become aggressive please seek the advice of a reputable behaviour specialist.

**If he is bored** he may bark when he has nothing to do. He may also be destructive in an effort to amuse himself. Bored dogs will bark or be destructive when you are in the house as well as when they’re left alone.

- Start by introducing some interesting activities into his routine. Try clicker training and simple puzzle-solving games (i.e. find the treat under a cup) and take him out more often during the day for calm walks with plenty of sniffing allowed. Keep interactions calm with plenty of gentle praise and rewards – the idea is to exercise his mind, more so than his body. A really good book full of ideas is ‘Playtime for your dog – keep him busy throughout the day’ by Christina Sondermann.
- Don’t leave him alone for long periods of time, we do not recommend that a dog should be left alone for longer than 4 hours. You could find a dog walker, or ask a trusted person to care for your dog if you plan to be away for longer than four hours.
- Consider getting him a companion dog, if your situation is suitable – he’ll be too busy playing to be bored! If not, at least try to arrange regular ‘play-dates’ with the well-behaved dogs of friends and family.

**If he is scared** he may bark at strangers, dogs or in certain situations. When he barks his ears may be back and his tail held low and he will stand away from whatever is frightening him. Even small movements or eye contact from the object of your dog’s fear may start your dog barking

- Dogs that are scared bark to tell us that they are not happy and this is a good thing because it gives us a warning that they cannot cope. Frightened dogs may eventually bite to get the ‘scary’ thing to go away and so it is important that you don’t ignore this warning.

- If your dog is scared of certain things or situations, making him face his fears is the worst thing to do. Instead, try to avoid them and ask your vet to refer you to a reputable behaviourist who can help your dog to safely get over his fears.

**If he can't cope with being left alone** he'll become anxious before you leave him and then start barking as soon as you walk out of sight. He may also be destructive and/or soil the home.

- This type of problem can be serious and difficult to fix so start by reading our 'Beating boredom and Coping alone' factsheets and consider contacting a reputable behaviour specialist for help.
- If this only happens at night when he is shut away to sleep by himself, consider letting him sleep within sight and sound of the family (e.g. on the landing with a baby gate) or in the bedroom with a family member.

**If you need more help with your dog's problem barking, please contact your Dogs Trust Training & Behaviour Advisor (if you have a Dogs Trust dog), or ask your vet to put you in touch with a reputable behaviour specialist.**

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