

Barking Basics

Barking is one of the ways dogs communicate. Unfortunately, this form of communication often becomes a nuisance behavior very quickly if it is reinforced even by accident by owners. To get rid of nuisance barking, we need to first realize that it is an attention seeking behavior, so if we reward it, even by accident, we will be reinforcing the behavior we most want to get rid of. ***So what is reinforcement?***

Reinforcement is ANYTHING your individual dog finds fun or pleasurable. Every dog has their own "list" of what they find reinforcing. Some dogs enjoy verbal praise and petting, some don't. Other dogs enjoy food treats or toys and some do not. There are dogs that enjoy car rides and wrestling with other dogs; however, not all dogs find these behaviors rewarding. Still others may be reinforced by something as simple as making eye contact with them. It is this type of simple reinforcement that often creates problem barking without the owners being aware that they may be making the problem worse as they attempt to make it better! ***So how do I avoid accidental reinforcement?***

To avoid reinforcing our dogs "by accident", we need to look at what it is they want in any given situation. Do they want to go in the car? Are they barking to demand a meal? Are they barking because they are frustrated about not being able to play with another dog or because we are handing out treats too slowly to a multiple dog family? Each barking scenario is different from the next, so owners need to step back and evaluate each situation **BEFORE reacting** to the dog in order to be more successful.

If a dog is barking to demand their breakfast or dinner and we go to the pantry and scoop some food in the dish, then we have just reinforced demand type barking whenever the dog wants their meals.

Attention seeking barking is analogous to a toddler's temper tantrum in the supermarket. If we give in to the toddler and get them the toy or candy just so they "quiet down", then we have reinforced the bad behavior of throwing a tantrum and the toddler will repeat that behavior the next time they want a toy or candy at the store. All animals repeat behaviors that get rewarded in some way- it's that simple. Dogs are masters at this theory. They most definitely repeat behaviors that work for them, behaviors that get rewarded in some fashion according to that particular dog. Remember, every dog is rewarded by different things, so be sure to analyze what your individual dog finds thrilling and rewarding! ***So let's look at a few examples!***

If my dog wants to go for a car ride and runs out in the garage and starts barking, I simply walk back in the house and leave my dog out there until they quiet down for a few seconds and then I reward the quiet behavior

by going back into the garage and opening the car door so my dog can "load up". If when I return to the garage, my dog starts barking again, I simply repeat my return to the house and wait a few more seconds for quiet behavior. The dog will QUICKLY figure out what makes you approach the car and what makes you retreat to the house. They want you as close to the car as possible, so you can open the door and drive them around. If barking makes you retreat to the house and quiet makes you come closer to the door and eventually open it so they can jump in, then the quiet behavior will win, because the motivating factor, the "reward" for quiet is a car ride. If I had opened the car door while my dog was barking, then the "reward" for barking is a car ride which the dog finds very reinforcing.

The reward is the same for the dog (car ride), the behavior you request from your dog in order to receive that reward is up to you as an owner. Be aware of what your dog wants in any situation and it will help you avoid reinforcing barking as you are trying to eliminate it.

If my dog demands my attention by barking at me and when my dog barks, I look down and tell her to "shush" or push her away, I have just reinforced her by giving her the attention she was seeking. From the owner perspective, I was negative with my dog, telling her to "shush" and pushing her away, BUT MY DOG was simply looking for me to give attention in some form. In general, our dogs don't interpret attention as positive or negative, attention is just that, plain and simple. So if my dog demands my attention with barking, I simply turn my back to make it clear to my dog that they get nothing, no attention at all, not even eye contact when they bark. If they are quiet for a few seconds, I will reward the quiet behavior with praise and attention.

If the dog is REALLY demanding, I may walk completely out of the room and leave them behind slamming the door behind me! The consequence for the barking behavior is that I left the room. I will return to the room only when the dog is quiet and so the consequence for quiet is a positive one and I return to lavish praise on my dog. Return to a quiet dog on an intermittent schedule as dogs are very good at predicting time frames. They will quickly learn that they only have to be quiet for 4-5 seconds and then you return, so be sure to enter the room and reward them with your attention at random times, sometimes 5 seconds, sometimes 2, sometimes 10 seconds, etc.

So each barking situation is different, but if you break it down and simplify it, so you look at what your dog wants in any given situation, you'll find a way to eliminate the barking and avoid reinforcing the very behavior you are trying to make go away!
Good luck and have fun!