



Watchdog or nuisance?

Most people have a dog for protection and companionship. However, barking dogs may generate conflict between neighbours and are the source of many complaints within the community.

It is important to understand the difference between a dog being a good watchdog and a nuisance barker. A good watchdog barks only when stimulated by what it thinks is a significant threat such as someone attempting to enter your property or things that may worry it (e.g. a snake or another animal in the yard, a house on fire, a bath overflowing).

A nuisance barker is one which over reacts to life's perceived threats or worries and where normal 'events of everyday life' cause excessive and prolonged barking that is 'above and beyond the call of duty'. Such dogs are often poorly trained or bored and some can even be anxious or fearful.

Good barking habits

It is easy to teach dogs good barking habits. So, when your dog barks excessively, you may find neighbours react by believing that you don't care about their needs or the needs of your dog.

Some breeds of dog are more likely to bark at intruders. Small breeds like terriers are often more alert and sharper than many large breeds, but they can also be nuisance yappers.

If you have a young dog or a pup that barks excessively, it is a good indication that it may be developing into a nuisance barker. It could be a sign that you have a fearful or anxious pup.

You should teach your pup to limit its barking by gently creating silence and then rewarding that outcome as shown in the following section.

Basic training tips

To train your dog not to bark, it is important that your target is to reward silence rather than to punish the noise. Punishment is usually not a precise way of changing behaviour and can confuse dogs.

Rewarding a wanted outcome is much more precise than punishment and you then have the choice of rewarding the same outcome several times in quick succession to create a stronger response.

When training a dog, stick to the same sequence of commands and use them over and over again. Don't keep changing the words you are using. Also, use your reward immediately after the barking stops to encourage their good behaviour quickly.

Try the 'bad dog - good dog' routine. For example, if the target is for your dog to leave the fence where it is barking, to come to you and to sit, stick to the sequence of commands of 'QUIET' then 'COME' then 'SIT'. The word 'QUIET' should be firm but not too harsh.

If your dog responds, reward it with a 'good dog' happy voice and a pat.

If your dog fails to respond, don't grumble at it. Instead, guide it to COME to you and to SIT and then reward it.

Also, your command sequence will be much more effective if you practice it when your dog is not barking. When your dog is calm, go into the yard and teach it to COME and SIT and reward it. Rehearse the sequence many times to reinforce that knowledge.

What effect does this have on desirable 'watch dog' barking?

It's much easier to turn barking on than to turn it off. So, your first task is to teach your dog the commands needed to turn off the barking. Once your dog has learnt this, you can then choose to allow watch-dog barking when it is needed.

When you are out

Dogs belong to the family Canidae, which includes wolves, jackals and foxes. They are pack animals and can be stressed and begin barking when the pack abandons them (ie. you or your family leaves the house). Some of the reasons for this include:

Separation anxiety - occurs if your dog usually barks as you are leaving home and continues throughout the day. It is much too exuberant in its greeting when you get home and can exhibit a variety of other behaviours. There are many solutions but keeping it busy with activities during the day will help.

Boredom - barking is often caused by boredom but your bored dog may also be destructive, dig holes or escape. To help stop this behaviour, fill your dog's day with fun activities and look for the many 'do-it-yourself' dog toys and timer-activated feeding devices that are available. Check your library, pet books and the internet for ideas.

Fearful dogs - fearful dogs are often over-reactive to the normal activities of everyday life and will bark excessively to try to 'scare things off'. These behaviours are often worse when you are not home to offer comfort and guidance. Socialising your dog with other dogs will often help but professional guidance with a qualified behaviourist or veterinarian may be needed.

Territorial - a territorial barker is usually bold and confident. Solid fences will often help but we recommend the help of a trained professional to reduce this behaviour.

Responsible dog ownership

There are many things you can do to be a responsible dog owner, including:

- Choosing a dog that is right for your property (ie, small yard, small dog)
- Desexing your animal at an early age (although it is never too late)
- Not allowing your dog to bark at things that are not a threat to your safety, such as pedestrians, cars, birds and other dogs.
- Only praising your dog when it barks at the right things, or stops barking on command
- Never consoling a frightened, aggressive or barking dog, as this reinforces the unwanted behaviour
- Seeking professional help if your dog is too difficult for you to handle
- Always walking your dog on a lead, and picking up all droppings
- Never letting your dog roam loose, especially at night – they are pack animals by instinct and may quickly develop pack animal habits like killing domestic stock or attacking people or other animals
- If dogs are "chasers", block their access to fences where they run up and down barking at passing people or traffic

Why do dogs bark at people passing your property?

Dogs often bark at people passing your home and delivery people, and it's not because of their uniform. Most dogs are territorial, and if someone approaches the gate the dog barks. If that person then goes away without coming inside, the dog thinks it has done its job and scared them off.

As the people pass by around the same time every day, the dog will begin to lay in wait and reinforce this behaviour for all passing traffic. It is important to stop this practice at an early age. Take the time to lead your dog outside to meet these frequent gate-callers and socialise your dog at an early age.

To teach your dog to limit its barking at these gate-callers, use the QUIET – COME – SIT method detailed in the "basic training tips" section earlier.

To help reduce your dog's barking a good option is to check your library, pet books and the internet for ideas.