



Barking in dogs

What does it mean and what do we do about it?

Barking is a common, frustrating and sometimes very serious problem for many dog owners. It can cause anything from mild annoyance to neighbourly disputes to formal disciplinary council action. In addition to being hugely stressful to owners, nuisance barking is potentially very dangerous for the dog. Barking is known to be a factor often leading to harsh unnecessary punishment, erosion of the human-animal bond, higher risks of relinquishment, surrender and premature euthanasia. In some extreme cases, barking can lead to dogs being fatally maliciously poisoned.

For these practical and ethical reasons, barking is a significant issue warranting close attention, solid understanding and appropriate intervention. However, barking has previously received little interest or exploration among the scientific community, despite it being one of the most conspicuous features of dog behaviour.

What is barking?

In the most simple terms, barking is a vocal form of communication, used for both intra-specific (dog to dog) communication and inter-specific communication (dog to people). But this definition is incomplete. Barking is not a single entity of a sound. It comes in many different forms and has more nuance and carries far more information than you might initially think. Emerging research has shown that among the spectrum of dog vocalisations, barking is impressive for its wide range of versatile acoustic parameters. Barking can vary greatly in frequency, tonality, pitch and rhythmicity. Barking also varies depending on context – which can mean internal (physiological) or external (environment) of the dog. With such intricacy and diverse variability available within the realm of barking, it can mean and signify many different things. The challenge for us is in trying to work out what the dog is trying to say.

So why do dogs bark?

Well, this is a complicated question. The first answer is: always for a reason! Dogs do not expend energy barking unless it is for good cause. **Barking serves to get the wants and needs of the dog met.** However, in some cases it is normal, in others it is not.

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Communicating state of mind:

A key point is that barking provides information about the inner state of the dog. Dogs can bark in many different emotional states and for many different reasons. They may bark when they are startled, fearful, anxious, insecure, conflicted or confused such as when encountering an unfamiliar person or object. Conversely, they may bark when they are feeling quite confident and secure, such as when they are patrolling a perimeter fence on their familiar property. They may bark when they are feeling excited and joyful such as when playing chasey with their human.

Interestingly, dogs may employ barking both as a distance increasing and a distance decreasing signal (again, the message is in the subtlety of the acoustics and the context). Just like for us humans, a hand could be waved in an enticing way that says "come over here" or could be waved in a dismissive way that says "go away I'm busy". Similarly, a frightened dog may bark in a defensively aggressive manner at a threat in an attempt to make it go away. Meanwhile, a dog feeling optimistic and playful may bark provocatively in an attempt to solicit play from another individual.

Attention seeking – asking for help:

Some studies have shown that dogs use barking as a means of getting our attention and showing us something to enlist our help. For example, they might want to alert us to the presence of something of relevance to them in the hope that we help them. For example, when a toy rolls under a couch and the dog can't reach it, it may bark and make eye contact with us and then the toy to attempt to communicate. This might seem fairly simple but if we break it down, this is actually super clever and complicated behaviour. It is evidence that the dog has an understanding of several factors such as that we will first respond to the vocal request of the dog by alerting to it and coming over, then be able to follow the gaze of the dog to find the source of the problem, recognise that it is a problem for the dog / recognise the dog's intention and then act accordingly (perform the desired task eg retrieving the object for the dog). Impressive!

Information seeking – asking questions:

Barking can be an effective way of asking questions for a dog. **Many dogs use barking to provoke the environment to obtain more information.** If an animal is unsure about a social situation and specifically, whether something constitutes a threat, they will often bark at it to see how it reacts and either confirm or deny whether it is something that warrants worrying about. This is overly common among anxious dogs whose brains are wired abnormally to feel and perceive threats more than normal. When dogs feel anxious and insecure they will often use barking or aggression as a way of throwing out a behaviour (acting upon the environment) to see what happens in response and help them to determine what they need to do. This is because anxiety scrambles and hampers any ability to rationally and accurately process information (especially social cues). This behaviour is termed "**provoking the environment**" and is seen in many different forms in many different

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contexts but always serves the same purpose - **to try and gather more information in order to figure out what to do to stay safe and feel better.**

So, how on earth are we supposed to know what a dog is saying when it barks?

Well, recent research has shown that people are intuitively pretty good at deciphering different types of barking and recognising how a dog feels when it barks - at least on a fairly crude level. In one study, subjects were asked to listen to an array of recorded barking sequences and rate them for five emotional states (aggressiveness, fear, despair, playfulness, happiness). People were generally quite good at differentiating which was which. Interestingly, the research found that experience of owning or being around dogs was not associated with better ability to de-code their barking – people were able to do it with fairly similar levels of accuracy whether they had spent lots of time around dogs or not. It seems we are able to innately (consciously or subconsciously) pick up on differences in pitch, tone and rhythm to roughly get an idea of the state and intention of the dog. This is interesting as it illuminates our shared evolutionary ancestry and the fact that we likely have some degree of in-built genetic understanding of dog behaviour in a very basic sense.

So, when is barking normal and when is it not?

When it comes to nuisance barking, of key importance is deciphering whether the barking and the dog doing it is normal or abnormal. To diagnose whether barking is normal or abnormal we need to establish whether it is appropriate in regards to 4 parameters: **frequency, intensity, duration and context.**

Then we can establish a diagnosis of whether the barking is a PROBLEM BEHAVIOUR or a BEHAVIOUR PROBLEM. (discussed in separate handout).

To know this, we need to first have a good understanding of what normal is.

Barking, like any and all behaviour, is caused by the overlap and interaction of genes, experience / learning and environment.

Is the dog reacting in a normal and expected manner? By this I mean a manner appropriate to the dog's genetics, experiences and context (not ours). Is it reacting to stimuli of relevance such as a cat on the fence or an intruder in the garden? Is it barking at a trigger we can't identify (remember dogs have very superior hearing and smell compared to us and sometimes we may be in the dark as to what the dog is barking at but it's certainly not nothing).

In terms of genetic influences, some breeds generally bark more than others if this has been encoded during their domestication and selection process. Some breeds do not or hardly ever bark at all but may rather howl or sing (eg Basenjis).

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Importantly, we need to remember that during our previous 15000+ years of shared ancestry with our dogs, in many cases we have selected for their barking behaviour as a desirable trait to us. Barking serves to warn us of encroaching threats while we sleep or flush out prey while we hunt or herd our livestock. We have effectively asked dogs to bark and this lingers in their genetics and instincts that we have had a heavy role in shaping. In this sense it would serve us well to take some conscious responsibility for their barking and remember that once upon a time it was a life-saving phenomenon and perhaps we should be grateful for it rather than frustrated. This change of perspective helps us approach and address the problem in a more enlightened and compassionate way. For example, when my dogs go crazy barking at something, instead of reprimanding them I say "thank you", acknowledge they have done a great job, provide them with the reassurance they need in seeing that I have recognised and responded to their alarm and then ask them to settle. In this way, everyone wins.

On top of genetics comes the layer of experience and learning. How much and in what contexts a dog barks is affected by all of the relevant learning it has undergone throughout its life. Has it witnessed and joined in with other dogs barking? Has it learned that barking is useful and successful or rather that bad stuff happens when it barks? Has or is the barking being reinforced? For a common example, if a dog barks at the postman and each time the post-man inevitably leaves, then the dog perceives that his barking caused the postman to leave – in this way the dog feels the barking behaviour was successful at getting the desired outcome (making the threat go away) and it has been strongly reinforced and will happen again next time.

We need to consider the context and environment (both internal and external to the dog). How a dog feels in a given situation will affect its behaviour and dog behaviour is extremely context-dependent and specific.

A dog may bark at other dogs when on-lead as it feels anxious and worried that it cannot get away, while off-lead it may not bark as it has more control and feels safer ie can use the flight response instead of the fight response.

A dog may be fine when walked during the day but will bark at people when walked during dusk or dark as it cannot see well (can't identify if someone poses a threat) and feels the need to act defensively and provoke for more information.

Often when dogs are settling into a new environment they may not bark initially as they are very insecure and inhibited. Then as they gain confidence, they may find their voice.

Other important rule outs for barking:

There may be medical reasons for a dog barking. Dogs may bark when they are in pain or discomfort or having seizures. They may bark if they have cognitive dysfunction and are confused and disorientated.

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Barking may also be due to mental illness involving emotional and psychological disturbances. Dogs with separation distress who panic when left alone will often deploy excessive barking in distress. Dogs who have generalised anxiety will often be hyper-vigilant and hyper-reactive, barking at benign stimuli as if it were a threat because they are suffering abnormalities in stress, arousal, perception and brain processing. Anxious dogs are also often overly noise-sensitive and more reactive to noises than normal.

So, what should I do if I think my dog is barking excessively?

- Be objective and know what you are dealing with.
 - Get some footage or sound recording (pop up a camera or have your laptop or tablet recording):
 - find out what kind of barking is occurring. Does it sound like an alarm, does it sound playful or perhaps does it sound distressed?
 - Determine the context, frequency, intensity and duration
 - Identify the triggers (cat on fence? Planes overhead? Post-man? Joggers running by?)
 - Establish whether the barking is normal or abnormal ie is this just a problem behaviour (normal for the dog but undesirable for you) or is it a behaviour problem (abnormal and not adaptive for the dog).
- Seek advice from a qualified veterinarian OR
- Seek advice from a qualified competent force-free behavioural trainer who is comfortable referring to a vet for help to diagnose and address any contributing medical and psychological abnormalities if possibly present.
- Trial some enrichment to occupy the dog's time budget with productive engaging activities to reduce the barking
 - This may help if under-stimulation is a contributing problem but will not assist in cases of separation distress or other medical / psychological abnormalities.
- Employ management strategies:
 - Prevent and avoid triggers
 - Remove visual and auditory access eg if your dog barks when it sees and hears people passing in the street then close the blinds and put on some music.
- Try behavioural modification:
 - Train a reliable "bark" and "shush" using positive reinforcement methods so that the dog learns to bark on cue when asked and be quiet on cue when asked.
 - Train a reliable "place" cue – lure the dog to a bed or safe place and reward it for stationing and settling there instead of barking when triggers are imminent, or the dog is already barking

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- Gently interrupt and redirect any barking into an alternative desirable behaviour eg call the dog and get them to a calming exercise such as sitting and making eye-contact for some treats.

If your own attempts to stop or reduce the barking via the above methods fail then this is when you need to contact your veterinarian or qualified force-free trainer as above.

What do I do if someone else's dog is barking excessively?

- Let them know – door knock or letter / call / email
 - Many people may not know as perhaps the dog only does it when they are not home eg separation distress or the dog is only outside to bark at triggers when the owner goes out. Some people are very grateful to be made aware that their poor dog has a problem.
 - Be sure to advise people in a compassionate, non-judgemental and polite way – try and leave any frustration and emotion out of the situation.
 - If they fail to believe you or fail to recognise there is a problem – suggest getting footage or you can use sound recording software to make some recordings and get the evidence.
 - Some councils provide bark recording collars which record data on how much the dog wearing it barks
 - If it is a serious problem and they won't take it seriously then may need to make a complaint to council. Council may issue a notice giving the person a chance to rectify the problem. If not solved, then a control (barking dog) order may be placed on the dog.
 - More info available via the dog and cat management boards of each state

KEY POINT: Things NOT to do if a dog is barking excessively.

There are some things that MUST NOT be done when dogs bark:

1. Punishment:

- Common examples include yelling at the dog, striking the dog, placing a citronella or shock collar on the dog or using a high frequency ultrasonic noise.
- Punishment is unethical and unhelpful.
- Punishing dogs who bark may suppress the barking but does not address the cause.
- It will make anxious dogs more anxious and worsen their illness and emotional state.

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- Dogs are barking for a reason and as a coping strategy.
 - **If we add more stress in the form of punishment this is severely detrimental as it frightens, frustrates and confuses the dog while taking away their behavioural coping strategy for their underlying distress.**

2. Getting emotional:

- Getting angry, frustrated and confrontational will never help
 - It will only serve to make your dog more frightened, confused, anxious and frustrated

3. Becoming confrontational with your neighbours:

- This will not help you, your neighbour or the dog – everyone needs to work together for a good outcome. Conflict and bad blood must be avoided.

In summary, barking is a complicated topic. Dogs bark at other dogs, us and other stimuli for many different reasons and have many different types of bark with different meanings in different contexts. Barking can be a part of the normal dog communicative behaviour repertoire or can be a sign of disease, mental illness and poor welfare.

Where barking is excessive or causing a nuisance then in order to address it we need to first understand why it is occurring and treat the underlying issue. If force free training techniques are not effective in reducing the barking then there may be a medical or mental health problem needing to be treated by a veterinarian.

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