

BowWOW!

Facts, observations and musings about Our Best Friends

What's the Bark All About?

For the past twelve years I owned and operated a boarding kennel, See Spot Run, in northern Vermont. The kennel was attached to my house, a practical concession to seven months of winter every year. Frequently I was asked if the barking ever got on my nerves. When I replied that we rarely had a problem with barking, people were surprised, assuming that all dogs bark all the time.

In the wild, adult canids (wolves and coyotes) rarely bark and only in specific situations: in defense of the den or pups, a warning, a protest, a threat or an actual attack. By comparison, our housedogs are virtuoso barkers, capable of a variety of melodies but also only barking for specific reasons. Genetics plays a role in the style and quality of a dog's tune. Those dogs selectively bred as "scent" hounds (beagles, coonhounds, foxhounds) give voice, usually a hearty Ah-Roo! to announce the presence of their prey. Herding dogs, the Type-A's of the dog world, will yap continuously while managing their sheep. Sight hounds (greyhounds, afghans) prefer to chase quarry rather than bark and guarding breeds will save their barks for serious provocation. While not as information-rich as human speech, dog barks can communicate a message, attract attention or express excitement.

Alarm barking is common to most breeds. It is a dog's way of telling you that Timmy's in the well, that something is amiss in his domain or that there is another barking dog on Animal Planet. At kennel there was always a rousing call to attention at the sound of a car door closing in the drive. (It's hard to sneak up on a building full of dogs.) Given that alarm barking is bound to occur, it's useful to teach your dog a positive mid-bark interrupt, something nicer than "shut up", like, "enough!". But before you use that interrupt, be sure to check to see what your dog is barking at. Timmy could quite possibly *be* in the well.

Demand barking occurs because your dog has learned that he can get something he wants—usually attention or snacks—by telling you, over and over and over. It's your dog's way of saying "I WANT IT NOW!". The best way to extinguish a demand bark is to completely ignore the dog—no eye contact, no conversation, even turning around so you're not even facing him. He may increase the intensity momentarily but if you stick it out and be consistent, you will prevail.

Dogs, as social creatures, become lonely and bored when left alone all day and often, all night. **Boredom barking** is monotonous and continuous, is annoying to neighbors and is most likely to elicit a knock on the door from Animal Control. The solution to boredom barking is simple: bring the dog in the house.

Stress barkers are fearful, anxious or panicked about something real. I once hosted an enormous, ungroomed Newfoundland who, in addition to looking like a yak, was wearing an enormous Elizabeth collar for medical reasons. Alex, the golden retriever in the next room, went berserk because he had just never seen anything like that before. It smelled like a dog, but it sure didn't look like one! (Alex spent the rest of his visit in the house with me.) Separation anxiety falls into the stress-barking category and is often manifested in hysterical, non-stop barking. SA usually requires intervention of a professional.

Play barking is common in herding dogs, the "fun police" of the dog world. As other dogs or humans romp, the play-barker will run around the edges, barking and sometimes nipping at heels. This behavior is inappropriate with children and should be managed by removing the dog from the scene or enforcing a "time out" each time the behavior manifests.

Greeting barking is your dog's version of "Hooray! Mom's home!" Simply wait at the door for the cacophony to subside and then enter calmly. No dramatic re-entry, no hugfest or "Mommy's missed you, too!" Use that same calm response when his enthusiasm is directed towards arriving guests, remove him from the scene and re-introduce him later in the visit.

Barking can be an annoyance but it's also one of the ways our dogs communicate. Take the time to learn the difference between your dog's vocalizations; he may be trying to tell you something important.

BowWOW! Is a production of Tracie Korol and wholeDog.
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