



Tompkins County SPCA

Dog Care Series

Barking Dogs

People talk, cats meow, ducks quack, and dogs bark. That's what they do. But when dogs bark excessively, it's enough to create neighborhood uproar. Assuming all parties are reasonable in their expectations, that's the last thing anyone wants. So what is to be done if your furry pal barks like there's no tomorrow? The answer is simple—*listen to what he is telling you*. You don't have to be Dr. Doolittle to speak his language. All you have to do is understand *why* he is barking.

There are generally four types of barking: (1) watchdog; (2) request barking; (3) spooky barking; and (4) boredom barking. Each one has a unique purpose and, more importantly, a different solution.

Watchdog barking serves two purposes for a dog. It alerts pack members that there is an “outsider” approaching and it warns the intruder that they have been noticed. Since domestication, however, companion dogs no longer have packs of dogs with which to live. As a result, they consider humans to be their families, and we serve as their surrogate packs. Your dog is doing what any good, upstanding member of a dog pack would do to protect the “family.”

Overcoming watchdog barking is done by teaching the dog a competing response—such as fetching a certain toy or doing a down-stay on a mat (which cuts barking in many dogs) for tasty food rewards every time an “outsider” approaches. Practice ringing the doorbell or have a friend be the “intruder” mimicking what sets off your dog—and offer him a particular toy and a treat until he learns that doorbells or “intruders” mean he should get his toy or he is going to get a treat if he lies down.

Request barking, on the other hand, is the dog's way of communicating to you that he would like something such as meeting that dog across the street or going outside. When they want something, dogs will experiment with various behaviors to see if any of them work. They quickly figure out that barking works with their owners. If you don't like barking, stop rewarding it but meet his needs. Rather than the dog telling you when to take him out, take him out at regular intervals instead, making sure barking precedes none of them.

Keep in mind that if you have been rewarding it for a while, the barking will get worse for a while. You're changing the rules and the dog will be frustrated at first. Above all, start noticing the dog when he's quiet by giving him treats. Teach him that there are payoffs for lying quietly, chewing on a chew-toy and refraining from barking.

Spooky barking occurs when the dog is uncomfortable about something in the environment and barks to say “I’m dangerous! Don’t come any closer!” To prevent spooky barking, socialize puppies extensively to a wide variety of people and dogs. If you missed the boat socializing your puppy, you’ll have to do remedial work with your adolescent or adult. Whatever it is that your dog is spooky about must now become associated with lunch. If he doesn’t like strangers, give him treats every time strangers are around until he improves. It takes a while to resocialize adults so stick with it.

But by far the most common type of barking is **boredom barking** which results because the dog’s daily needs for companionship, socialization and mental stimulation are not being met. The classic example of boredom barking occurs when owners are neglectful of their dog’s needs by keeping him outside or chained most of the time.

And the advice is simple: If you don’t have time for a dog, don’t get a dog. There is no quick fix here—you must meet your dog’s basic needs for stimulation, exercise and companionship and that cannot occur if the dog is constantly chained or not allowed indoors.

Where most people fail with dogs who bark excessively is by simply dismissing a dog as “bad” and trying to punish the behavior out of him. Instead, the answer lies in learning the language as each bark has a purpose. And understanding that purpose—*looking at it from your dog’s point of view*—is your key to neighborhood bliss.

