

Barking dog, neighbors complaining... Ask a Trainer

By Nan Arthur, CDBC, CPDT, KPACTP

Dear Trainer,

My dog has a doggie door and access to the yard during the day when I'm at work. One of my neighbors has complained that he barks for hours on end. I set a tape recorder up to see how long he is barking after I leave and it's not "hours" but he sometimes barks for 15 or 20 minutes at a time, but only a couple of days a week. The way the tape sounds there are other dogs barking in the neighborhood at the same time.

I don't want my dog to disturb my neighbor, even if the barking is not as long as he says. Can you give me some positive ideas to keep my dog quiet when I can't be there?

Signed,

Barks a lot

Dear Bark,

Barking can be an annoying problem for everyone that has to experience the noise. However, while barking is annoying for the humans, it is the product of many potential emotional stressors for your dog. With that in mind, I'm glad you are looking for positive methods to help your dog. Using punishment or electronic devices add more stress to already anxious dogs, and they often have fallout effects that range from compulsive behaviors to aggression since dogs don't understand why they are being punished. After all, they are just doing what they believe is the right thing to do when they bark.

It was a great idea to set up the recorder and discover that other dogs were also barking in the area, as this gives you a clue as to what might be going on. Other dogs or ambient noises that might trigger the barking in the first place often stimulate dogs to vocalizing. This is referred to as alert barking.

Some other reasons for barking might be boredom (it feels good to "sing" and release all that pent up energy), frustration or fear barking, and attention-seeking barking are also on the list.

Determine why your dog is barking

If you can narrow down the reason, or reasons your dog is barking it will be easier to minimize the problem. Notice, however that I said minimize, not "cure" the barking. Dogs are dogs and they do bark, so don't expect that your dog will never bark again after you work on the problem.

Since your dog appears to be barking when other dogs are barking you might look for things that typically trigger dogs into expressing themselves. These would include UPS trucks, letter carriers, trash trucks, children playing, gardeners, and meter readers, to name a few of the top reasons that spur dogs to bark.

Is your dog barking on specific days, such as trash day, or when neighbors have a gardener? If you think this might be the case, preventing your dog from going out on

those days, or having a dog walker come in to take your dog out during those times would be simple solutions.

Whether your dog is barking from boredom or alert barking, adding environmental enrichments to his space can quickly solve some of those barking problems. Think about some of the following to make his area more fun when you are gone, providing more mental stimulation and culling the boredom:

- Use a Kong Time, (www.kongtime.com) which is a machine that will distribute four stuffed Kongs during the course of the day. These are food puzzles that help provide mental stimulation and keep your dog busy.
- Use other food carrier toys, such as Buster Cubes or Treat Balls to feed your dog his morning meal so he has to work hard to get his breakfast. These things will tire him and give him more reason to sleep during the day rather than bark.
- Use white noise such as music (classical is best) to mask some of the outside stimulus. Also look into Canine Lullabies at www.caninelullabies.com for a wonderful CD that has a calming effect on dogs.
- Take your dog to doggie daycare or hire a dog walker if you can identify the days when he is barking more, or just to add some variety to your dog's day.
- Block any visual stimulation that might be causing the barking, such as holes in fences

You might also look into using some calming herbal products to help take the edge off and help your dog ignore some of the outside noises.

Working with a positive reinforcement trainer that has had experience with barking dogs is still another way to help with the problem.

Finally, take an olive branch to your neighbor and explain that you are working on the problem and would appreciate his or her feedback. Your neighbor can be a great help in solving the problem, since he or she is home during the day and might be able to help you identify when your dog is barking. Ask your neighbor to keep a log of when and how long your dog is barking, and if he noticed anything that might have triggered the barking in the first place. This might be the detective work you need to get to the bottom of the barking, as well as a way for your neighbor to be part of the solution.

Good luck,
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