

Jess Sandstrom

Howling Success Dog Training and Behaviour Barking Dogs

It can be enough to drive even the biggest of dog lovers crazy! Anyone who has lived with a dog knows that barking is a normal dog behaviour that they should be allowed to do where appropriate but excessive barking can quickly become problematic. Not only for the people in the home but for neighbours too. If you google barking dogs the first thing that pops up will often be a variety of 'anti bark' devices. While such quick fixes may be tempting it is important to remember that solutions like these represent treatment of the symptom rather than the cause of behaviour or what some may call a 'band-aid solution'. None of these tools are recommended by the RSPCA or Pet Professional Guild of Australia and are highly unlikely to produce a long-term change in behaviour.



Many dog guardians would be hesitant to place something on their dog or around their home that works to suppress behaviour by causing their pet physical or emotional discomfort. But, when the pressures of having a dog who barks excessively are coupled with the presentation of what appears to be a fast cure all it is not surprising that in some cases temptation wins over.

So, if anti-bark devices are not recommended what is? How can you help your dog humanely while also addressing the problem?

The first thing to ask yourself is: Why is my dog barking? That may seem a painfully obvious question but you would be surprised how often dog trainers ask clients this and are told 'everything!' or 'nothing!' or 'I have no idea!'. While these are understandable answers because they usually come from a feeling of frustration we need to make sure we are able to pinpoint your dog's trigger for barking if we want to create meaningful, long lasting changes. Bearing in mind that your dog may be barking for different reasons at different times. Some of the common ways we may categorise barking are:

- Alert Barking: "I am a dog and I saw a thing!"
- Fearful Barking: "I am worried about what is happening."
- Connection Seeking: "Hey look at me!" "Let's play!!" (Previously may have called 'attention seeking')
- Separation Anxiety: "Please don't leave me." (Note: Separation Anxiety is best referred to a specialist trainer)

One of the best ways to categorise or understand your dog's trigger or triggers for barking is to do an ABC assessment of the behaviour. In an **A-B-C** assessment the **A**ntecedent is the event that occurred immediately before the **B**ehaviour. The **C**onsequence is the event that occurred immediately after the **B**ehaviour. In this

situation we are trying to note what has happened immediately before and after your dog has barked to better understand how we can replace their barking behaviour with a more appropriate alternative.

A few examples could be:

A: A friend appears. **B:** Dog barks. **C:** Guardian lets dog off leash to greet friend.

In this situation we could predict that the barking is being reinforced by the access to a friend. Possibly leading the dog to believe that their barking was what caused their leash to be removed.

A: Stranger walks by the front of house. **B:** Dog barks. **C:** Stranger continues walking out of sight.

In this situation we could predict that the barking is being reinforced by the person leaving. The dear dog doesn't know that the person was going to walk by anyway and may be led to believe that their barking at the stranger is what saved their home and family from certain doom.

A: Possum noises in the roof. **B:** Dog barks. **C:** Possum appears outside window.

In this situation we could predict that for some dogs the sight of / contact with the possum is reinforcing the behaviour of barking OR we could also predict that for other dogs the possum vacating the area is reinforcing the behaviour of barking.

Relating your dog's behaviour to their body language can also be a fantastic way to gain further insight into the function of their behaviour. A dog who is moving forward toward the trigger with tense body language may fall into the category of 'I want this thing to go away', a dog who is moving towards the trigger with loose or wiggly body language may be hoping to gain contact, or a dog who is moving away from the trigger with tucked body language may be saying they are unsure and would like to get away. Understanding your dog's body language is a critical part of being a good dog guardian. Make sure you learn how to speak dog!

Once you have pinpointed your dog's trigger/s for barking you have the information needed to change it. But, before you start on any training journey it is necessary to ask yourself a few questions:

- Has my dog had a sudden change in behaviour?

A sudden change in behaviour (be it barking or any other abnormal change in your dog's behaviour) should warrant a vet check to rule out any illness or injury before anything else. We simply cannot train out a medical condition.

- Am I truly meeting my dog's needs?

Think physical, mental, social and emotional needs. It can be a hard pill to swallow when we feel that we are doing our best with our dog and providing them with everything we think they should need. But, sometimes it is important to take a step back and really ask yourself these difficult questions. Is your dog getting sufficient exercise? Do they get adequate quality rest? Are they mentally enriched by being provided with breed appropriate challenges and activities? Am I spending real quality time with my dog?

As a trainer I will never forget the lightbulb moment one of my clients had when she said *"I am with Rover all the time but I rarely actually spend time with my dog..."* In this instance the client resolved to make sure that they were not simply taking their dog with them everywhere but ensuring that they were actively engaging with their dog doing things that he enjoyed.

- *What do I want my dog to do instead of barking?*

Dogs are not great at doing nothing. This is one of the big reasons why we don't recommend punishment, anti-bark collars or simply shouting NO. Because none of these things tell your dog what to do instead of barking and are likely to be poor long-term solutions. (Plus, there is always the old joke that when you shout at your dog for barking, you are simply barking with your dog!).

Some great options for behaviours to replace barking are:

A: A friend appears. **B:** Dog looks at Guardian. **C:** Guardian lets dog off leash to greet friend.

In this situation we could predict that eye contact is being reinforced by the access to a friend. Hopefully leading the dog to believe that their calm attention was what caused their leash to be removed.

A: Stranger walks by the front of house. **B:** Dog finds Guardian. **C:** Guardian provides high value reward.

In this situation we could predict that running to find a guardian is being reinforced by the presentation of a high value reward. Providing the dog with an alternative and more reinforcing option than barking the house down.

A: Possum noises in the roof. **B:** Dog goes to bed. **C:** Guardian provides high value reward.

In this situation we could predict that going to a bed, mat or crate area is being reinforced by the presentation of a high value reward. Again, providing the dog with an alternative and more reinforcing option than engaging with the possum.

Environmental management is a corner stone of good dog training. Managing the environment means doing everything you can to prevent your dog's contact with a trigger outside of training sessions. It simply isn't possible for you to be ready to train at all times of the day and we know that if the unwanted behaviour is being reinforced as often as the replacement behaviour we are unlikely to see meaningful change.

Doing what you can to physically block your dog's sight of the road out the front by leaving curtains closed or masking the sounds of the possum with the TV or calming music can help dramatically when starting a training plan! In some situations, where the excessive barking can be resolved through environmental management alone and the dog guardian is satisfied with that type of result it can replace the training plan all together. In other cases, managing the environment is an extremely important and often overlooked stepping stone in changing your dog's behaviour.

Now, it is all well and good to say we would like our dog to do one of the above behaviours in the presence of a huge distraction like a possum or beloved friend.

But, it will take some time and persistent training working at a difficulty where your dog can be successful easily before you reach your goal behaviour. This is where we often hear clients say “I tried positive reinforcement but it didn’t work”. Let’s be real, if I have a dog who has a history of rehearsing the unwanted behaviour of running to bark at a possum and I stand there saying “Go to Bed” right off the bat...I don’t think it would matter if I had the tastiest BBQ chicken on the planet! The dog would be pretty unlikely to notice me and would simply continue with their previously practised behaviour.



One of the best ways to begin this type of training is to start with something your dog is already doing in the sequence of the unwanted behaviour that is appropriate and then build on that. Using the possum example, we may find that the dog hears the possum, stands up, moves towards the source of the noise and then begins to bark until the possum comes down. In this situation I could begin training at the very moment I hear the possum or the very moment I notice my dog’s ears prick to the sound of the possum before the barking begins.

In this early stage of training I wouldn’t be asking my dog to do anything specific, I would simply notice the trigger and begin tossing that high value food on the floor in front of the dog to create the association that when you hear this sound – chicken rains from the sky. This event – event learning is one way to get our foot in the door before our dogs become over stimulated to the point that they cannot listen or focus. With enough repetition we should find that we set the expectation of possum sounds = chicken and we should get to a point where the anticipation of chicken causes our dog to look towards us expectantly the moment they hear the critter sounds.

At this point you may start to throw the food towards the dog’s bed! Continuing the training as time goes on watch your dog’s body language – Are you seeing a reduction in stiff, tense muscles? Is your dog starting to eat the food in a more relaxed fashion instead of gobbling it up as quick as they can? If so, it might be time to ask them for a well-rehearsed, easy behaviour like Look, Sit or for some dogs it may be Go to Bed. If this occurs then you’re well on your way to gradually building that replacement behaviour! Just make sure that you don’t stop reinforcing that replacement behaviour until it has become extremely stable and is occurring with utter ease. When that occurs see if you can start to gradually taper down the ratio of reinforcement until you reach a realistic goal.

The solutions outlined above are just some of the ways that we can begin to analyse and resolve a dogs excessive barking. Excessive barking is something that will take time, consistency and dedication to change especially in the case of a dog who may have a variety of reasons for barking. Outside of situations where environmental management alone may satisfy to resolve excessive barking we must accept that

there are no quick fixes! Meaningful behaviour change takes patience and many repetitions of reinforcing the replacement behaviour to be successful. If it feels like nothing is working and you're at your wits end seek help from your local force free professional dog trainer.

Helpful Links!

Anti-bark devices not recommended

RSPCA <https://kb.rspca.org.au/knowledge-base/should-i-use-an-anti-barking-collar-to-treat-my-dogs-barking-problem/>

PPGA <https://www.ppgaaustralia.net.au/Statement-on-the-Use-of-Pet-Correction-Devices>

Sep Anx Specialist: <https://jhdogtraining.com.au/separation-anxiety/>

Body Language: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/lilita/5652847156/sizes/l/>

Find a Dog Trainer: <https://www.ppgaaustralia.net.au/page-1862187>