

Inside Voice Please!

By Laura Tyler

Excessive barking is right at the top of the list of common dog owner or dog neighbor complaints. It can cause great upheaval between neighbors or family members. And over time even law enforcement might become involved. Usually when this happens everyone has reached the limit of tolerance.

Let's establish some types of intervention.

It seems a common first response is always to yell at the dog to BE QUIET! And repeat those words several times while chasing the dog around the couch to stop him. Now, let's take a look at how the dog might interpret our behavior: Dog thinks, *I hear someone coming up the steps! I am conflicted here. Do I drive off that intruder or do I let my person know? I'll let my person know: bark, bark, bark!!! Oh, no! My person is barking too! I'll help! Bark, bark, bark! YIKES! My person is chasing me.... I don't know what that means but I'd better get out of his way! Run! Fido Run! Bark, Bark, Bark!!!!*

The door opens and it's one of my favorite people! Hi! Bark, Bark, BARK! And my person yells more: GET DOWN and SHUT UP! YOU STUPID DOG!!!! And then I'm sent outside. Dog thinks, I only wanted to let you know that someone was coming and that someone is our friend that always pets me and invites me up for rubs!

If any part of this over exaggeration sounds familiar here's a suggestion or two to help manage the problem of too much barking.

First reinforce some basic training. If your dog is crate trained, teach her to go to her crate when she hears the doorbell. Yes, you can teach this to your dog but, YOU have to be ready to put in the time to train it. It will take weeks to months of consistent training to replace barking with this new behavioral response. The fastest way to teach it is to start when your puppy is young; before barking becomes a problem.

If you listen to your dog, you will notice there is a pause in the first volley of barking. (This isn't always true within a multiple dog household. That's another story). Teach your dog that three to five barks is enough. Reward, yes I said reward that first volley of barking. Thank your dog for being your first alert system! That's a very suitable job description. (Let me know what you hear or smell that I don't; then I will investigate and I'll let you know if everything is OK.) Then teach the cue, ENOUGH or SHUSH, the word doesn't matter; you are now teaching your dog to be quiet. Reward, being QUIET with several treats in a row and redirect your dog to do something else such as go to your crate or bed.

Household manners are the hallmark of a great relationship with your family dog. Waiting until things start to unravel and then punishing your dog seems a bit backwards to me. Be proactive and reinforce good behavior. If you need to step in and interrupt bad behavior, be sure to tell your dog what to do instead.

Once law enforcement is brought into the picture, things change. It usually means your neighbors have had quite enough. But, sometimes that intervention can be a blessing in disguise. No more putting off making the training and management changes you need in order to "keep the peace".

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