



## Demystifying “Demand Barking”

Barking is a normal part of dog communication. Many dogs learn that barking is the most effective way to let us know when they need something, whether that is attention, food, play time or going outside. We colloquially refer to this as “demand barking,” because it is most often used when a dog is trying to meet a need.

While not inherently negative, barking can be obnoxious and, in some cases, pose a threat to a living situation, such as in an apartment building with noise restrictions. So how can we help our dogs choose a different method of communication? We can...

- Track when and where our dogs bark
- Identify why they are barking / what they need
- Preemptively meet their needs
- Teach our dogs a new way to ask for what they need
- Take punishment out of your repertoire

For many dogs, “demand barking” has a strong history of being reinforced by getting what they need when they bark. For this reason, it can be a challenging behavior to change. Consistency, creativity, and patience are needed to change this behavior!

### Track when and where your dog barks

“Demand barking” tends to occur at specific times in our daily routines. By tracking when and where we see this behavior, we often find that patterns emerge. Does your dog bark at mealtimes, when you come home, when putting the leash on for a walk? *Knowing when and under what circumstances the barking occurs will help you understand why your dog is barking and what need your dog is trying to meet by barking.*

### Identify What Your Dog Needs

One of the most important parts of addressing demand barking is determining what need your dog is trying to meet. Once you know what your dog needs, you can start meeting that need *before* they bark at you about it. Some common needs that dogs bark for are...

- Social Interaction – “This is the fastest way to get you to pay attention to me!”
- Food/hunger – “I REALLY want to eat that, right now please! GIVE!”
- Play/boredom – “Ugh, I’m bored. We’re just sitting around, let’s play!”
- Urgency/bathroom – “Come ON, I gotta go outside RIGHT NOW!”
- Self-regulation/excitement – “WAHOO! I’m excited! It feels good to bark and express myself!”

For more information or to request behavior assistance, visit [eastbayspca.org/behavior](https://eastbayspca.org/behavior).

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Once we know what our dog needs, we can either preemptively meet their needs or teach them a new way to ask for what they need. Preemptively meeting their needs is often quicker and easier. Training a new habit can take a bit more time, but can also pay off in the long term.

## Preemptively Meet Your Dog's Needs

Since our dogs are barking to ask for something they need, we can stop the barking by providing what they need before they have to ask for it. Be creative and find ways to preemptively meet their needs through changing their environment or routine.

Here are some examples of how to preemptively meet our dogs needs

- **When & Where the Dog Barks:** Dog barks excitedly when you enter the house  
**Identify the Need:** Your attention, Play/boredom, Self-regulation/excitement  
**Solution:** Preemptively toss a treat scatter when you enter. Research tells us that sniffing lowers a dog's heart rate. A lower heart rate means not as many big feelings for your dog to express. If you preemptively scatter treats as you enter, your dog will be preoccupied with gathering them up. A dog is not likely to bark while they search for treats! Done consistently, your dog can begin to anticipate the scatter. They may start to wait further from the door so it's easier to collect their treats. Keep treats by your door (or even outside your front door) to make it easy to be consistent. *Once your dog has calmed down, you can reinforce their calm behavior by giving them your attention!*
- **When & Where the Dog Barks:** Dog barks while you are sitting on the couch  
**Identify the Need:** Your attention, Play/boredom  
**Solution:** Give your dog an enrichment item to occupy their attention before you sit down on the couch. You can make enrichment items in advance so they're easy to grab when you need one. Please see our [enrichment handout](#) for ideas!
- **When & Where the Dog Barks:** Dog barks while you are preparing dinner  
**Identify the Need:** Food/Hunger  
**Solution:** Give your dog an enrichment item activity to keep their attention while you cook. The dog can enjoy the treats in the enrichment item instead of focusing on the food you're cooking.  
**Training Solution:** If your dog is too focused on what you're cooking to enjoy their enrichment, try training a "station" behavior. Essentially, you give them a treat or tasty tidbit from the counter as long as they stay stationed on their bed or mat. With a bit of work, you can have a dog who lays quietly as you cook, waiting for the moment they know is coming when you'll reward their efforts. We can make laying quietly pay off MUCH better than barking.

## Teach Your Dog a New Way to Ask for What They Need

Our dogs know that barking can get them what they need, but we can teach them that other, more desirable behaviors can work just as well or even better! First, choose a new behavior you want your dog to use to get your attention. You can train a new behavior like nudging you with their nose or

ringing a bell. You can also choose a behavior they already know or do naturally like laying on the floor at your feet.

Once you choose the desired behavior, immediately pay attention to your dog any time they do that behavior. Based on the time of day and location, offer them your attention, play time, treats or a potty break. Be impressed with your dog as they start offering the new behavior to ask you for things! Just know that you'll have to honor the new signal, or your dog may fall back on barking.

## Take Punishment Out of Your Repertoire

While barking can be obnoxious and frustrating, we need to remember that it is a natural way for our dogs to communicate with us. We as humans have even bred certain breeds to be MORE vocal. *If we need our dogs to communicate with us in a different way, it is our job to show them clearly what we want them TO do.* Everyone deserves to have their needs met, including our dogs! And there are so many creative ways that you can meet those needs instead of trying to suppress them through punishment.

It is very possible to frighten a dog into decreasing barking through yelling or scolding, but that does not address why they were barking in the first place and can damage the relationship you have with them. Punishing a dog for barking can also lead to dangerous behavior. A dog who is too scared to bark due to past punishment, may escalate to snarling, growling or biting when they have something really important they need to communicate!

## Why We Don't Simply Ignore the Barking: Extinction bursts

Many folks will have heard that if you just ignore the behavior, it will go away. And this can be true! But with an important caveat. Ignoring a behavior that used to work can lead to frustration and an escalation in the behavior called an Extinction Burst. Imagine you use a vending machine at work. One day when you put your money in, nothing happens. Do you immediately give up and walk away, or do you shake and kick the machine first before giving up? This final intense effort to make something work when it has stopped working is known as an "extinction burst."

If you suddenly stop rewarding a behavior that has "worked" in the past, your dog will redouble their efforts (in this case barking longer and louder) before giving up. Aside from the fact that if you "give in" during this time it will cement the fact that they just have to try harder, waiting for extinction bursts to level out is often very frustrating for our dogs, and unpleasant for us! This is why we instead recommend proactively meeting your dog's needs, and/or teaching them a new behavior.

New habits take time to build, and often having the help of a professional to guide you can make all the difference. If you would like to change the habits your dog has around *barking*, you can set up a [free helpline with one of our trainers](#), or sign up for a [private training session](#)!

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