

We observe many behaviors in daycare that prompt questions from our clients. One behavior raised frequently is excessive barking and what to do. Perhaps your dog barks excessively at daycare, while on a walk, or in your home. Not only might barking be undesirable, but if you let them bark, they are more likely to do it in the future. After all, the more dogs practice a behavior the stronger the behavior becomes. You would think the quick fix would be to tell the dog to quiet down or ignore them (which is not as easy as it sounds) in hopes that they will eventually calm down on their own. But this approach rarely works and can actually make things worse. It is more likely that you will just increase the dog's stress and frustration, than reduce their barking. It is a common misconception that dogs are barking for no reason. In reality, dogs bark for many reasons. Barking is an essential communication tool for them. They bark to communicate needs, wants, and emotions, including fears.

Because barking is an important form of communication, it is up to us or other dogs to consider what the dog is trying to communicate. Their body language can help us decode the intent. We can evaluate the setting (environment), tone or pitch, pattern (meaning space between barks), and the frequency to get a better understanding of their bark. Let's dive into some of the possible reasons we hear dogs barking excessively in a daycare setting or in the home:

1. **Excitement or high arousal.** Dogs in a high state of arousal or excitement will often bark, both at the daycare team and the other dogs. In this context the bark is typically higher pitched and often accompanied with an alert body language, tall looking, moving about, tail flagging, eyes looking up, mouth open. At daycare, we typically hear this excitement bark when dogs are transitioning out of their playgroup into the quiet time room or when it's time to take them out for their potty break. At home you might hear this when it's time to leash up the dog to go on their walk or car ride somewhere. The dog is excited to get going or do something. **What to try:** We try to encourage impulse control by opening the crate door when the dog is quiet. They are quiet and get reinforced by being let out of the crate. At home, you could put down the leash and wait for your dog to pause before starting their walk. You could also ask for a sit or some other behavior to change the narrative.
2. **Stress or anxiety.** Sometimes, we come across dogs who may not be comfortable with the playgroup's energy level, so they will often bark at the team or the other dogs to communicate that they are uncomfortable. The dog's tail may be tucked, head low, or they may be panting. Our job is to assess the situation and remedy it as best we can. For dogs

who attend daycare regularly, this type of bark is usually caused by an increase in energy in their playgroup, maybe a new member entered the group, or we introduced a toy in the group and now the dogs are more active than they were just a short time ago. You may see this at home if something in the environment changes like a sound that is unfamiliar, or something out of the ordinary is happening like furniture being moved or a guest visiting.

What to try: The goal is to try to identify the source of the dog's anxiety and first see if you can modify the environment to reduce their stress. This is a practical management solution. However, longer term you would want to work with a trainer to build positive associations with those triggers to help your dog comfortably adapt or learn how to calm themselves when there are changes in the environment and reduce their overall stress.

- Attention Seeking / Boredom.** Barking for attention can be closely tied to the dog's state of arousal, but this bark is more focused on wanting to get the other dog or human to interact with them. In daycare we may observe a dog barking at another dog for attention while the dog they are barking at is busy doing something else (resting, playing with another dog, receiving attention from the daycare attendant). Or the dog could be barking because they want to keep interacting with a toy, bubbles, or some other form of enrichment we provide at daycare. At home, your dog may stare and bark at you when you finally sit down on the couch after a long day because they want you to interact with them, feed them, or go out for a walk. The dog's body language is going to be more alert, but still a loose body as they want to interact in a positive manner. **What to try:** If the dog is interested in something that isn't appropriate at that moment, our team will attempt to redirect their attention and help them focus on something else that oftentimes is a lot less arousing and helps to calm the dog down. For example, asking them to sit or climb on a piece of equipment. If the dog is barking to get you to do something (e.g. give them a treat) ask them to do something first (sit, do a trick, get off the furniture, etc) then reward them with the object they seek. The goal is to teach the dog patience by slowly increasing the length of their pause.
- Alert!** Dogs in a playgroup will often bark at us to alert us of a situation. We are actively monitoring our playgroups, but oftentimes dogs will pick up on changes in behavior faster than we do, and their barking at us is one way they communicate to us that something is going to happen so that we can be on alert to prevent a potentially harmful situation. These

are similar to barks you may hear at home when someone is at your door, or your dog is surprised by a strange movement or sound they hear. It is usually a single bark or they are spaced apart. It is similar to the dog shouting “Hey!, what’s that!, who’s there!”. **What to try:** Our team will often try to thank the dog for letting them know and then address the situation or they may try to soothe the dog. We may ask them to say “hi” to the mop that just fell or walk over and fix whatever is out of sorts. You can take the same approach at home. First recognize their bark and focus on making the dog more comfortable with what caused them to go on alert, but only if the dog is choosing to.

It is helpful to try to understand why the dog is barking before you can expect them to stop barking. Evaluate the different tones you hear and their body language. A different bark will tell you different things about the state of the dog’s well being and their needs. These descriptions of barks and body language are similar across breeds, however each dog is unique. Dogs mainly communicate through their bark, so it is important that we learn to differentiate between different barks so that we can effectively meet the needs of the individual dog.