

Do They Bark?

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I'm always amused when people find out my dogs are deaf. One of their first questions is, "Do they bark?" Oh yes, and boy, can they bark! Some deaf dogs have a very high-pitched bark. My theory is that perhaps they can hear the higher pitch of their own bark. I have no idea if that is actually true, but two of my deaf dogs have very high-pitched barks. The other has a rather deep bark for her size.

The way I start to teach a dog to be quiet is by naming "quiet" when the dog is actually being quiet and then offer calm praise. I use the same technique with my deaf dogs. I use one finger pressed to my lips as the quiet signal. With a blind-deaf dog, use a touch signal for quiet. When the dog is being quiet, give the quiet signal and then quickly give the good dog signal and a treat. I do this sequence several times while the dog is quiet. You are essentially naming for the dog what "quiet" is while they are already being quiet.

When the dog does bark, I am ready as soon as the dog stops barking (even if it's only a quick pause) to give the quiet sign and then the good dog sign. I give a treat after the good dog sign. Chewing the treat helps to distract the dog from whatever it was barking at, which allows me to get more quiet signals practiced and reinforced. It also helps to more strongly reinforce the dog for being quiet. Be sure not to give the quiet signal until the dog is quiet at this stage. You are teaching the dog what the quiet signal means, so you must be sure to only give it when your dog is quiet.



Until your dog has really learned the quiet cue, practice naming and reinforcing it often whenever he is being quiet. Be very sure when teaching quiet that you are not reinforcing the dog for barking. If your dog barks at you and you throw the toy, you are teaching him that barking gets him what he wants and he will be more likely to bark. If your dog barks at you and you give him part of your snack, or pet him, or open the door to let him outside, you are teaching him to bark more. If you want a quiet dog household, focus on rewarding quiet dogs and not barking dogs. If you do, you will find less and less barking happening.

When your dog is barking, most likely he won't be looking in your direction. You will need to first get his attention – waving your arm in the air in his line of sight may work, or a gentle tap to his body. When he looks at you, be ready to give the quiet signal quickly before he looks away. If you've done your homework in using the quiet signal often and then giving a treat, your dog should at least pause and look at you expectantly. Reward quickly! If you wait, he may start to bark again because he's excited about whatever he's barking at. Continue to give the quiet signal and reward with several treats one at a time while he is quiet. And don't forget the praise too!

What if your dog gets quiet with the initial quiet signal and eats his reward, and then turns back to barking again? Don't let him continue to bark. Get back in there and interrupt the barking again by getting his attention back on you. If he does not respond to your quiet signal at all, you will need to go back and review giving the signal and rewarding when he is already quiet. Your job is to make that quiet cue super important to your dog so he will pay attention to it.

As you continue to practice the quiet signal, you can gradually space out those treats to get longer periods of quiet between each one. Give the first treat right away when the dog gets quiet, and then pause for slightly longer periods of time before giving the next treat, etc. Do this step gradually. Only expect a few seconds of quiet between treats at first. If you try to move too quickly, your dog will start barking again in between treats. You can build up the time as your dog is ready. Over time, you can give fewer treats, but rewarding the quiet now and then will help keep the behavior strong.

Giving a quiet cue does not mean that your dog will never bark. Dogs bark. That's something they do. A quiet signal will give you a way to communicate to your dog when you'd like him to stop barking. And if you teach your dog to bark on signal, too, then when people ask you if deaf dogs bark, you can show them!

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