



Reinforcing barking?

If you have a reactive dog who is very vocal and at the same time really likes your treats, you might have wondered if you are training your dog to be less reactive or *actually* rewarding him for barking.

In a counterconditioning session this may look like this:

1. Your dog sees a trigger, startles a bit and barks
2. You scatter treats for him
3. He eats the treats, then looks back at the trigger and barks, until you give him more treats

This does indeed appear like your dog is training you to feed him when he barks, right?

In the vast majority of cases this is not what's happening. Let's look at this in more detail. As mentioned, the worry that we are rewarding dogs for barking usually comes up for dogs that are rather bark-y in general, and also really like food.

With these dogs we need to be very careful in counterconditioning sessions, as their love for food can actually somewhat mask how close to a trigger they feel comfortable. There are dogs such as Australian Shepherds that will eat anywhere, anytime, under any amount of stress. This poses the risk of moving our dog too close to the trigger because he will still eat the treats. An owner might believe that just because the dog does not completely refuse to eat, he is in a good state of mind and the trigger is at a good intensity. Again - not necessarily true.

If your dog is close enough to the trigger that he will bark, eat your treats, bark again until there are more treats; this is usually a sign that you need to decrease the intensity of the trigger. The dog is showing us that unless he is not physically unable to bark (because he is eating) his stress level makes him bark.

I know how it is a bit confusing. It looks like your dog is barking in order to make you feed him. But in fact, he is most likely barking because that's the stress level he has, and the treats are interrupting the barking. But as soon as your dog has stopped eating, he goes back to barking.



There is usually a very distinct body language associated with this where the dog will have his head down sniffing for treats, and as soon as he has found them all he will abruptly raise up his head very high and bark.

An easy way to test if that is what's happening is to decrease the intensity of the trigger a lot and try again. If your dog is barking a lot less or not at all anymore, and is able to sniff treats without throwing his head up suddenly, chances are that you were working with him too close to his threshold.

A second option to distinguish between stress-barking and demand barking is this: I have actually trained my dogs to bark on cue just as a trick, and dogs that bark on purpose in order to earn a treat actually sound very different from dogs that bark from stress. If your dog is indeed barking in order to make you give him treats, and his barks have nothing to do with the trigger, he will not sound the same.

A dog that's barking on purpose will have isolated barks. They sound like this: "Woof ----- woof ----- woof" whereas the barks of a stressed dog are more continuous, like "Wooo-wooo-woof! Woof woof woof".

The dog that's barking on purpose will also look at you nearly exclusively, because this is where he expects his reward. The dog that's barking from stress that's been induced by a trigger will look back at the trigger again and again.

Yet another option to "test" if your dog is barking at a trigger due to stress or barking at you for more treats is to stop the treat delivery (similar to what we mentioned in the segment on reducing treats).

If your dog is performing the voluntary behavior of barking for treats, then stopping to reward the behavior will put it on extinction. That's a fancy term to describe that when a behavior no longer pays off, the learner stops performing it.

So if your dog was thinking "I bark and I get treats", then not giving him treats anymore will eventually make him stop barking.

However, if your dog was still barking due to stress (this is the more likely explanation), then stopping treats will make him more stressed. Because we would no longer be helping him be relaxed and facilitating a calm and positive state of mind.



Now - I do not want you to go out and spend 3 or 4 training sessions testing all these things repeatedly.

If you are wondering whether you are training your dog to bark, the most likely answer is no - he is simply still too wound up around triggers and the treats are just "interrupting" his bark. In this state it would be quite detrimental to mess around for too long with no treats and different distances to the trigger.

You can do what I described as a quick test and then move on.

Just know that it actually is quite a long stretch for a dog to go from feeling stressed around his triggers and barking - to building a new, positive CER around his triggers - to having such a solid new CER around his triggers that he is able to now "train you" to give him treats while barking. If your dog has improved this much in his reactivity, you are basically done with this course. That is really a long way to come for a dog.

It means having such good progress in the classical conditioning aspect of training that the dog just by himself moves on the operant conditioning *you*.

The more likely explanation is that your dog simply likes food enough to let it interrupt his stressed out barking.

See if the same thing still happens when you are working with your dog at lower trigger intensities - chances are this behavior will be decreased or go away.