

*We have a 6 year old, 6 pound Chihuahua that has a mild disposition until he sees another dog such as when riding in our car and we pull into a parking space with a dog in the vehicle next to us. He just goes crazy barking and growling at the other dog. No amount of saying no and trying to sooth him does any good. The only remedy seems to be moving to another location, then he calms down. We adopted him when he was one year old. He has always had this behavior but it seems to be getting worse. Any suggestions you have would be greatly appreciated.*

Dogs bark for a variety of reasons: to display territoriality, because they are excited, or as a part of a greeting. But most often, dogs bark because they are afraid. Barking is normal, but it can get out of control rather quickly. Dogs often begin barking as a stranger approaches our car or home. The “scary” person walks away and your dog thinks that his barking made the stranger leave. Because of this, barking can be a self-rewarding behavior.

Attempting to sooth an upset dog, has the same effect as praising him. So in essence, you are additionally reinforcing the inappropriate behavior. Unless the dog has had a good dose of obedience training, saying “no” won’t work either. When a dog is in an excited and in a reactive state, he sees our attempts at scolding him as joining in the barking. Again we are reinforcing, rather than correcting the problem.

I always recommend that you and your dog have some degree of obedience training before you begin to modify your pet’s behavior. Obedience work provides the base of a common set of vocabulary with expected behavioral responses to work from. In addition, your dog will be practiced at listening to and taking directions from you. Obedience training also helps to establish you as a strong and benevolent leader.

In the case of a dog barking in a vehicle, the first thing I would recommend is restricting the dog’s movement. Dogs form patterns to their behavior. Usually, when they are carrying on about something outside the car, they are also running back and forth over the seats and across the peoples laps. Stopping this pattern will break the focus enough for you to implement part two; give the dog something else to think about. You can use some of the obedience directions that you have been practicing. Down is a good one. Another very positive exercise is to practice your dog’s response to his name. This is one of the most valuable exercises that I work on with my students. If you do your training right, your dog will respond to his name just like Pavlov’s dog did to the sound of the bell. Okay, not just like, he won’t be drooling, but his response will become conditioned.

The key is to break the dog’s focus on what is going on outside, making him think more about you and what you are asking him to do inside the car. Your success will depend on how well you have established your relationship with your dog and how consistent you are in redirecting the inappropriate behavior. If you start to correct the behavior then give up because it seems too hard you will teach your dog that persistence pays. In effect, you will train your dog to work harder at the barking.

Look for baby steps in the correct direction and reinforce those. If your dog breaks his concentration for a split second and attends to you, be ready to reinforce with a high value treat and loads of verbal praise. If your dog resumes the inappropriate behavior, immediately stop the positive talk, and return to your redirection plan.

This is a great behavior to correct with a set up. A set up is an artificial re-creation of an event that causes an unwanted behavior. The great thing about set-ups is that you have complete control over the environment and the event. You can ask your helper to wait until you have your dog under control. You can ask your helper to walk by the car again and again until you have success.

When modifying any behavior, consistently creating positive outcomes are the key. Just like any habit, repeating the right behavior will help it to become ingrained. The more times you and your dog succeed the more positive you become and the happier both you and your pup will be.