

Barking

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BARKING PROBLEMS

Dogs bark for a variety of reasons, some good, some not so good. Sometimes barking is a welcoming signal, other times not. Sometimes dogs bark briefly, and other times they just won't quit. And therein lies a problem.

By nature, some breeds tend to bark more than others. Beagles and Shetland sheepdogs, for instance, tend to be very vocal. Greyhounds and basenjis, by contrast, rarely bark.

Barking is a form of communication. When people or other dogs are around, barking can be a statement intended specifically for them. When a sound is used as a means of communication from one creature to another, the rudiments of language exist. Language after all is just a complicated arrangement of verbal/vocal cues. We can communicate with dogs by means of our language, but we are often rather poor at understanding their requests. Phrases such as "come here," "leave it," "stop it," inform the trained dog what must be done, but their barking often leaves us stymied.

Barking serves different purposes. Sometimes it is used to repel and sometimes to attract. Some barking tones indicate, "stay away," whereas others (particularly in the appropriate context) can be interpreted to mean, "I'm over here, where the heck are you?" Even the most inexperienced of dog watchers will notice that dogs have a variety of different types of barking ranging from the muted "woof" of appreciation or alarm to loud angry series of barks indicating aggression.

Barking often serves as an alarm call. Many owners appreciate such alarm barking and some domestic dog breeds have been selected for an enhanced warning system of this nature. When the barking produces the desired result, the "language" is reinforced and perpetuated. But not all of this "language" is wanted or appreciated by friends or family (let alone the neighbors). The key to dealing with barking is to be able to turn it off.

WHEN BARKING IS A PROBLEM

In order to deal with a barking problem, you first need to know why your dog is barking.

TO GET ATTENTION

Most people get a little irritated when the family dog barks and gets whatever he wants. These dogs are pushy individuals who insist on getting their own way, demanding attention and the limelight. This is the kind of dog that will not allow you to sit peacefully and relax. Instead, he will bark in your face demanding to have a ball thrown, to be allowed on someone's lap, to be given food from the table, etc.

So what allows a dog to become like this? In a word, conditioning. Although we sometimes don't realize it, we are training our dogs all the time through our actions. No dog will persist in a strategy that doesn't work, whether that strategy is barking, whining, or crying. Whatever produces the goods is what is reinforced. A dog that barks to get attention will have been trained to do so by random intermittent reinforcement for barking. Barking for attention, if ignored, will intensify before it dissipates, because the dog will try even harder, at first, to make his point. Here are some suggestions on how to deal with an attention-seeking barker.

- **Attention withdrawal.** Ignore the “bad” behavior and only respond with attention when the dog is quiet. You should not make direct eye contact with the dog, speak to him, or touch him, when he is barking. To the attention-seeking dog, any attention is better than no attention - even if it's in the form of scolding.
- **Bridging stimulus.** If the attention withdrawal becomes tedious, a *bridging stimulus* can be employed to hasten progress. A bridging stimulus is a neutral sound, such as a duck call, or even a click, that is made as soon as the dog begins a tirade. It signals that you're about to withhold attention. This strategy can produce a speedier resolution of attention-seeking barking than simply ignoring the dog's barking because it focuses the dog's attention on the consequences of its actions.
- **Punishment.** Audible punishment can be a deterrent. This can be done by issuing a command, such as "No Bark!" and punishing the dog by shaking a "shake can" (a can with a stone inside of it) or by blasting an air horn/fog horn if he does not respond to the command immediately. The technique sometimes works, but audible punishments are only really effective for more sensitive types of dog.
- **Counterconditioning.** Counterconditioning involves training the dog to do something that is incompatible with his previously conditioned behavior, in this case barking. For example, you can train your dog to go to his bed, where he will receive praise from you and perhaps a long-lasting food treat, whenever the stimulus that previously caused barking occurs, such as mealtime or talking with someone on the telephone. The new behavior (eating and lying quietly) replaces and is incompatible with barking for attention.

SEPARATION ANXIETY BARKING

Then there's barking caused by separation anxiety, which often takes place as you prepare to leave or when you're not around. There are two types of separation anxiety barking:

- The acute, hysterical type of barking that occurs within minutes of the owner's departure, representing panic - a cry for help.
- The more chronic variety of more monotonous barking expressed by dogs that have all but given up on their ability to do anything about their predicament.

The two types of barking have similar causation yet sound different and represent different stages of the same condition. The acute variety a distress barking takes the form of intermittent bouts of "expectant" barking, perhaps interspersed with bursts of whining, designed to attract the attention of the owner (or, in some cases, anyone) to the dog's miserable plight. The treatment for this problem is the same as the treatment of separation anxiety because separation distress is at the root of the problem. Too many owners fail to recognize their dog's suffering when irate neighbors complain of being disturbed by the dog's incessant barking. Instead of viewing the problem as a problem for their dog, they only see it as a problem for them. Punishment of such behavior is an all-too-frequent and misguided solution. Physical punishment at any time, especially after the fact, is not only pointless but is counter-productive and inhumane.

More chronic "stereotypic" barking, with its monotone and seemingly mindless motivation, also derives from separation anxiety. It occurs once the purpose of the dog's barking has altered to become a simple release for anxious energy - a displacement behavior. Stereotypic barking indicates that a dog has been left alone for extended periods for years and has all but lost faith in its ability to summon anyone's attention to its plight. In this respect, chronic displacement barking is a barometer of long-term suffering. The humane solution for these dogs is to give them their due by making arrangements to prevent them from having to experience such isolation and futility in the future. Training them not to bark misses the point and will often not work, anyway. Punishment is inhumane. For such characters, much more fundamental issues have to be addressed to bring about resolution of the problem in hand.

Some dogs bark just to get attention, demanding to be the star of the show at all times. This is often the result of unintentional conditioning by the owner.

OTHER CAUSES OF BARKING

TERRITORIAL BARKING

One of a dog's main duties around the home is to bark and warn off any strangers and alert fellow pack members that an intruder is approaching. This function is very much appreciated by many owners and has prevented many a burglary. Having a dog in the house is as good, if not better, than having an electronic surveillance system. But problems arise when overly enthusiastic dogs continue to bark longer than is necessary to alert its owners of approaching persons.

The trick is to train the dog to stop barking once the warning has been acknowledged. For most dogs this is usually not too much of a problem. A "good dog" or "thank you" is sometimes all that is needed to acknowledge the dog's warning of a stranger's approach. It's good manners, too, to thank your dog for performing his duty. If barking persists following your acknowledgement and thanks, however, a "cease" command, like "stop it!" or "enough!" should be used afterwards to call an end to it.

Training the dog to the "stop it!" command should be performed using positive reinforcement. The reinforcement is provided when the dog has stopped barking for at least 3 seconds. You may have to wait for a while at first, but the dog will eventually get the message if the reward is sufficiently potent. Because you can't have visitors standing outside the door for 30–minutes, waiting to be let in, you should orchestrate training sessions using a volunteer visitor who has the time and patience to see you through the session.

TYPICAL SEQUENCE

- Stranger approaches and rings the doorbell. Dog barks. Owner says, "Good dog, thank you."
- Dog continues to bark. Owner says "Enough!"
- Dog continues to bark. Owner remains motionless. Stranger waits.
- Dog eventually stops. (They all do, eventually). Owner says, "Good boy!" and the dog is given a delicious food treat as a reward for stopping barking.
- Stranger rings the bell again. This sequence is repeated until the dog is responding more quickly.

Training session should always finish on a good note with the dog being rewarded for quiet behavior. The stranger then withdraws. This exercise should be repeated daily for several days until the dog stops barking quickly (less than 3 seconds) on command and remains quiet as the visitor enters the home.

If all else fails, you may need to resort to a slightly more direct method. The preferred technique is using the Gentle Leader® head halter.

First train the dog to wear the head halter without struggling. Fit the device and a 10-foot long training lead before a planned visit from a friend. Your dog will bark as the stranger approaches. Praise the dog for barking, and then issue the command "enough." If the dog continues to bark, apply gentle, steady upward traction to the training lead, which

will cause the dog's nose to be elevated and will transmit pressure to the dog's muzzle and nape via the nose-band and neck strap, respectively. Maintain the tension until the dog relaxes and is quiet. Then release the tension and praise the dog for quiet behavior (even though you made it happen!).

If you consistently silence the dog in this way by applying tension to the muzzle (via the head halter) and nape (via the neck strap), the dog will learn that it is hopeless to disobey the "enough" command. It learns that you inevitably intercede and take control of the situation using this powerful, yet gentle, training tool.

Another technique, with or without the assistance of a head halter, involves counterconditioning your dog. As mentioned before, this means training him to do something incompatible with the behavior in question; in this case barking at the door or in the yard, after you have conceded that there actually is someone out there. You could, for example, train your dog to go to an out-of-the-way part of the house and relax whenever strangers appear and reward him (extremely well) for this behavior.

Caveat: One problem most owners face when trying to train their dog not to bark at the door is that they try to manage too many things at once; controlling the dog, opening the door, greeting the stranger, and ushering in the stranger, all at the same time. For optimum success, you need to set up trial approaches from volunteer strangers and apply your concentration to handling your dog.

Finally, the territorial dog that is motivated by fear is a slightly different situation. Although some of the above measures might help with such a dog, the chances of success are more limited. These dogs are actually anxious/fearful around strangers and may never settle down, even after the stranger has been welcomed. Such dogs need to be enrolled in a "total package" program in which they are not only controlled at the door but are also systematically desensitized to strangers, perhaps starting such an exercise on neutral territory at first.

REACTIVE BARKING

Some dogs don't just bark at approaching strangers - they bark at anything that moves or alters their environment: a passing car, a falling leaf, an icicle breaking off, and so on. Such dogs are the antithesis of the lazy old coonhound that takes everything in his stride: They are constantly on "red alert" for anything that might happen. This type of dog can be difficult to cohabit with, especially if you don't need that degree of protection. Highly reactive dogs take their self-defensive and family-guarding responsibilities way too far. Perhaps by nature, perhaps by nurture, these dogs trust no one and regard every environmental change as a threat.

So, how do we persuade these dogs that their mission is pointless when each environmental disturbance eventually stops, thus reinforcing the behavior? The answer is that we can't. All you can do, with your veterinarian's help, is to address any medical contributions to such hyper-reactivity, provide adequate exercise, ensure an appropriate diet, and attempt to exercise the best physical control possible. This type of treatment is not too far removed from the program to control territorial barking; only its application may need to be even more intense.

If medical problems like hypothyroidism or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) underlie the problem, the fix may be a quick one. If not, then you have your work cut out. Above all, it is important to enrich the lives of such reactive barkers so that they understand what is, and what is not, worth barking about. The innate drive for dogs to bark plus our own mismanagement can produce a dog whose behavior is so ingrained that it takes medication (in addition to behavior modification therapy) to effect even a marginal improvement. It's far better to act early to prevent such a progression.