

Singing His Song: The Barking Dog

Dogs bark for many different reasons. It may be genetic, as some breeds of dogs seem to be predisposed to being more vocal than others. Breeds such as hounds, collies, shelties, cocker spaniels, and beagles. Some dogs are more fearful than others and feel they have to alert you to every possible peril such as a leaf falling off the tree. Some breeds are very territorial and feel they must alert you to any possible threat such as the mailperson or newspaper delivery person approaching.

Some dogs are just bored. Being kept in the backyard all day long fosters boredom; dogs may invent ways to keep themselves busy, perhaps by barking. Other dogs are very stressed by being left alone outside all day without their humans (sometimes called separation anxiety). These dogs exhibit stress by barking, digging, chewing and general destructiveness but only when left alone. By making your dog more a part of the family, your dog will become happier and less prone to these stress behaviors, including unwanted barking.

Outside stimulation such as neighbors working in their yard, being teased by a passerby, meter readers doing their job, etc., can also set your dog off barking each day. By bringing him inside to live, there is less for him to bark at.

The key to really solving a barking problem is to first find out WHY your dog is barking. Is it because he is bored? Anxious at being left all day (separation anxiety)? Because he is being teased by neighbors? Does your dog only bark at a particular time of day or only when in a particular type of situation? Does your dog only bark when you have left him alone or does he bark when you are home as well? Try some of the general guidelines listed below for a couple of weeks before resorting to any punishment and **do some detective work first before picking a specific solution.**

GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR THE BARKING DOG

HANDS OFF YOUR DOG WHEN HE IS BEING VOCAL. Any touching or soothing behavior you may try to do to your dog at this point will only reinforce the barking! Only touch or pet your dog when he is being still AND quiet. Consult a behaviorist if you think your dog is barking because of fear or a separation anxiety problem.

DO NOT REWARD BARKING BEHAVIOR BY: petting or touching your dog, picking him up (leave him on the floor), feeding your dog a treat or his dinner, opening the door for him because he is yelling at you, letting him out of his crate, or giving in to something that he may want (his walk, his cookie, his dinner, his car ride, etc.) Wait until your dog is quiet before you give him what he wants.

REWARD SILENCE! This is the most important part of teaching your dog to be quiet. It is important that we reward our dogs for good behavior every single day of their life. Each time your dog is quiet when normally he would bark, make sure you praise him vocally, with a pat or scratch, and with a treat. This is so he learns you like it a lot when there is silence in your house.

MAKE YOUR DOG A PART OF YOUR FAMILY. Unacceptable behavior, like unwanted barking, is NEVER improved by isolating your dog to the backyard. In fact, that may be the reason why your dog is barking all the time because he is



very unhappy being left outside. Bring your dog inside while you are gone if that is the only time he is barking. He will feel more secure inside the house and less apt to bark. If he is destructive while you are gone, then crate train him so he is prevented from being destructive indoors. A dog is a pack animal and needs daily social interaction with his family. As a minimum, your dog should be with you whenever you are home, including sleeping indoors at night. If you have not taken your dog to training class, now is the time to do so. Pack animals need their pack and for better or for worse, you're it.

PROVIDE PLENTY OF EXERCISE. Before you leave your house for the day, give Fido a good romp with a ball or Frisbee. The general rule of thumb is 20 minutes of aerobic exercise twice a day. Remember, a tired dog is a good dog because then he is sleeping, not barking or being destructive.

GIVE HIM A SAFE PLACE TO LIVE. If your dog is being teased or upset by your neighbors, then build a secure, sight-proof dog run in the middle of your yard, away from your fence. Or better yet, bring your dog indoors to live with you. Crate train him so he can sleep indoors or remain indoors safely when you are gone for the day. Put in a doggie door so he has access to the indoors during the day and he can avoid noisy neighbors or teasing cats.

USE TIME OUTS. Before you leave your dog alone, do not spend so much time with him that when it comes time for you to run errands or go to work on Monday, Fido is over-anxious at the thought of you leaving him. Deliberately ignore him for 20 to 30 minutes at least three times a day (pretend he is not there, do not pet him, say anything to him, or make direct eye contact, and just move away should he try to paw you, nudge you or crawl in your lap). Make sure your whole family participates in the time out periods or they are ineffective. Once he accepts these time outs calmly, go on to time buffers.

USE TIME BUFFERS. Studies have shown that most dogs are at their destructive and vocal worst 20 minutes after you leave in the morning for work (Fido is stressed he has to spend the day alone) and 20 minutes before you come home in the evening (Fido is getting geared up to see his

favorite person!). Time buffers teach the dog to settle down for the day and to remain unemotional when you first return home. Fifteen minutes before you need to leave the house in the morning, put your dog in his crate, dog run or room (wherever he is to spend the day) and ignore him. When it is time for you to leave, just leave. Do not make a big deal out of it. A "Good bye, Rover. Have a nice day" is enough. What you are teaching your dog is to settle in for the day, and not get so emotional when you say good-bye. Now do just the reverse when you come home. Leave your dog in his day confinement (or if he is loose in the house, do not touch him, make direct eye contact, or talk to him) for fifteen minutes before greeting him. This will teach your dog that even though you have come home, there is a cooling off period before he can be greeted.

GIVE YOUR DOG SOMETHING TO DO WHILE YOU ARE GONE. If your dog is busy chewing, it's very unlikely he will be barking at the same time. Good chew toys are Kongs stuffed with cheese, biscuits, peanut butter or any meat leftovers. Stuffing sterilized beef bones with meat also works well. Put several special chew toys down just before you leave for the day and pick them up when you return home. Another good item to keep your dog busy is the Buster Cube. You fill it with your dog's daily ration of kibble and he has to work on it to receive his meal.

TRY DOGGIE DAY CARE. Enroll your dog once or twice a week in a local doggie day care center so he can spend time playing with other friendly dogs and be worried less about you leaving him alone for the day. Or take your dog to a friend's house for the day so he can visit with them. A dog that has played all day is going to sleep away the night and most of the following day.

DO NOT HIT, SLAP, PUNCH OR KICK, OR HOLD YOUR DOG'S MOUTH SHUT in the hopes that he will stop barking. Punishment such as this teaches your dog nothing except to fear you! Do that detective work and find out WHY he is barking.

DO NOT USE AN ELECTRONIC SHOCK COLLAR ON YOUR DOG. Studies have shown that dogs who wear "shock" collars are much more likely to develop fear or aggression problems. If you have tried everything else above for a

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minimum of two weeks and have not made a dent in the problem, the ONLY humane bark collar recommended is a citronella collar. Consult a behaviorist BEFORE using one however.

If you hve any problems, qustions or concerns, please cll the Humane Society Silicon Valley's FREE Animal Behavior helpline at (408) 727-3383 x 753.