

DOG BARKING

Why do dogs bark?

Barking is one of the most common complaints of dog owners and their neighbours! Up to a third of noise complaints to the Environmental Health Department of some areas concern disturbances by dogs. But barking is natural. It serves as a warning signal and alarm to others. Dogs may also vocalise when separated from their pack or family members, as well as at times of indecision, anxiety, or frustration. Medical problems can also contribute to vocalisation, especially senility in the older dog.

How can barking problems be prevented?

Socialisation and habituation — get puppies used to as many new people, animals, situations and noises as possible. This will minimise the amount or intensity of alarm barking. Barking should only be allowed to alert owners and then be controlled and stopped before the dog becomes agitated and out of control. Owner control, training and leadership are essential.

How can I prevent my dog from barking when I leave?

Effective cage training techniques when your dog is first obtained, should decrease the dog's anxiety when it is left alone in its cage. Your dog should be taught gradually to spend longer periods of time away from you. Two dogs can sometimes help to provide company for each other and reduce distress vocalisation and departure problems but this is not always the case.

My dog constantly barks. What does it want?

Attention seeking barking can be problematic and is often reinforced by owners giving in to their dog's demands. Allowing a barking dog indoors, or feeding, patting, praising, playing with, giving a toy, or even just going to a barking dog to try and quieten it down, are just a few examples of how an owner may unknowingly reinforce barking. Never reward this sort of barking with any type of attention.

How can I train my dog to be 'quiet'?

Training the dog to a "quiet" command is an invaluable aid for controlling undesirable barking. You need to find an effective means of quietening the dog, which should be preceded with a command such as "quiet". Just loudly telling your pet to "be quiet", will not be understood and is likely to excite the dog further.

One of the most practical techniques for teaching a dog to cease barking on command, is first, to be able to command the dog to begin barking on cue. Use a stimulus that will cause the dog to bark and pair it with a "bark" command. Numerous repetitions allow the dog to associate the word "bark", "speak" or defend with the action. Dogs that bark on command can then be taught to turn off the barking by removing the cue or stimulus, and giving a "hush" or "quiet" command just before the barking subsides. As soon as your dog is quiet, give a favoured treat or reward. In some cases it may be necessary to show the dog the treat whilst giving the command and while it is barking. The treat is then withdrawn and when the dog is quiet, the command repeated quietly and the treat given.

It can be difficult or impractical to teach a dog to be "quiet" on command if the barking cannot be predicted or "turned on" or if it is too intense.

Another method to teach a "quiet" command is to wait until your dog is barking, say to a doorbell and while he is barking place a very tasty food treat by his nose. Most dogs will stop barking to sniff the treat. At the same time you must say the word you will use for quiet, such as "silent", "hush" etc. When the dog quietens because it cannot sniff and bark at the same time, you can praise him, say "good, quiet" and give the treat. Again, as with all new tasks, numerous repetitions are necessary to enforce the learning.

Alternatively, distraction or remote punishment devices (see below) can be used to disrupt the barking. One of the most effective means of interrupting barking and ensuring quiet is a remote lead and head collar. A tug on the lead disrupts the dog and closes the mouth. Releasing the pressure can then reinforce quiet behaviour and then a reinforcer such as gentle, quiet praise or food given if the dog remains quiet.

What are my chances of correcting my dog's barking problem?

The outlook is usually good for most barking problems. But the household situation in which the dog resides may make it extremely difficult to correct completely. Even a small amount of barking could disturb a sleeping baby, or upset neighbours, (particularly in flats or townhouses). When trying to resolve barking problems, identification of motivating factors is important. Some stimuli are so strong that it will be difficult to stop the barking behaviour directly and a form of desensitisation will be required.

What can I do to correct my dog's barking problem?

The treatment programme must be based on the type of problem, your household, the urgency of the situation, and the type and level of control that you require. A good behavioural history is important to determine cause, motivation and potential reinforcing stimuli for the barking behaviour. Treatment plans need to consider the following:

- 1) Ensure that the dog is not being rewarded inadvertently. Some owners in an attempt to calm their dog down, will actually encourage the barking by giving attention, play, food or affection.
 - 2) Sometimes the home environment can be modified so that the dog is kept away from the stimuli (sounds and sights) that cause barking. Exposure might be minimised by confining the dog to a cage or room away from doors and windows, alternatively windows might be covered so that the dog cannot look outside. Solid private fencing may be helpful for dogs outdoors. Dogs that bark when left alone outdoors may have to be kept indoors except when the owner is available to supervise. Trigger sounds such as doorbells or telephones that might have become conditioned stimuli for barking should be altered to change their sound.
 - 3) Until effective control is established, training programmes are unlikely to be successful. Increasing interactive play periods and exercise, cage and confinement training, head collar training and obedience classes may need to be implemented before bark control training can really begin in earnest.
 - 4) Once you have sufficient control and the dog responds to obedience commands and handling, it should be possible to train your dog to cease barking on command. Training the dog to cease barking on command can be accomplished with lure reward techniques, distraction techniques, or halter and lead training. Regardless of the technique, rewards should be given as soon as the barking stops, so that the dog learns that quiet behaviour earns rewards. It is most important to associate silence with the command used. Over time the behaviour should be shaped so that the dog is required to stay quiet for progressively longer times, before a reward is given.
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5) Once the owner has sufficient control with training and the quiet command, it may then be possible to begin a retraining programme in the presence of the stimuli (people, other dogs) that lead to barking. Training with a head collar and lead often provides a tool for implementing the techniques safely and effectively especially indoors or when the owner is nearby. The stimulus should first be presented in a mild form to the dog from a distance (e.g. children riding bicycles slowly on the street while the dog stands well back), and the dog given a quiet or sit-stay command. Although the head collar and lead is generally all that is required to control the dog and achieve the appropriate response, the dog could also be disrupted using a remote distraction. Training sessions are then repeated with progressively more intense stimuli. This type of training can be effective, but progress can be slow and time consuming.

6) Pets that are barking for other reasons e.g. fear, or separation distress will require treatment for the underlying problem.

Should I punish my dog when it keeps barking?

Punishment is seldom effective in the control and correction of barking problems. Excessive levels of punishment can increase anxiety and further aggravate many forms of barking, while mild punishment merely rewards the behaviour by providing attention.

What are anti-barking collars? Are they effective? Are they cruel?

Bark-activated collars can be useful in specific circumstances. They are not a quick fix though. The collars themselves are not cruel, but the way in which they are used can cause serious welfare concerns. Audible and ultrasonic training collars are occasionally effective but they are neither sufficiently aversive nor consistent enough to be a reliable deterrent. The type collar which emits a spray of citronella each time the dog barks should not be used in anxiety or fear-related barking and is not an alternative to effective training. The citronella interrupts the behaviour and provides the owner with an opportunity to reinforce appropriate behaviour. As soon as the barking ceases, the owner should redirect and encourage the dog to perform an enjoyable alternative behaviour (play, tummy rub) as long as the dog remains quiet.

Electric shock collars can be extremely dangerous in unskilled hands and are not generally recommended for use by the general public.

Even an electric shock will not deter a dog that is highly motivated to bark and there is then the potential for both physical and psychological damage. In severe cases an experienced professional should be consulted.

Bark collars only work when they are on the dog. Most dogs will learn to distinguish when the collar is on and when it is off. When they are not wearing the collar, most dogs will continue to bark.
