

How to Deal with Incessant Barking

BACKGROUND

Barking is the normal way dogs communicate. They may be alerting an owner to a stranger, danger, or simply playing. Barking may increase when any type of reinforcement is associated with it. For example, a barking dog that is fed as soon as barking starts will consider the food to be a reward and has learned to bark in order to obtain the food. Barking can provide a dog with a sense of satisfaction when any type of reward is obtained. However, incessant barking can be a part of medical disorders such as separation anxiety or canine cognitive dysfunction syndrome (senility in aged pets). In some dogs, as in some people, there is simply a tendency to be more vocal about things that would not elicit a response from most other individuals.

GETTING STARTED

Equipment/materials needed:

- Citronella collar (collar that sprays a mist of citronella to help stop barking)
- Consultation with a veterinary behaviorist

TROUBLESHOOTING BEFOREHAND

The behavior of incessant barking in dogs can be difficult to correct, and different methods of correction may be needed. Dogs may bark to receive attention, in defense of a stranger or another dog, out of fear, or due to separation anxiety. Barking is never improved with yelling at the dog or physical punishment; dogs that bark playfully will simply bark more, whereas yelling or punishing dogs that bark out of fear or confusion will only worsen their problem and can bring out other problems (destructive behavior, urinating/defecating in the wrong places indoors, etc.).

If dogs are punished with the owner present, and the stimulus of the barking is not addressed, the dog may stop barking in the presence of the owner but may continue when the owner is not present.

PROCEDURE

- Identify and eliminate the cause of the bark:
 - Is the bark a new habit? If so, recent changes may help explain the onset of the bark, and modification of these changes may decrease barking.
 - Is your pet older than 10 years and showing signs of “aging” such as decreased awareness of people and places around the home? And/or changes in behavior such as new-onset bouts of unprovoked aggression? If so, cognitive dysfunction (senility) may play a role in barking, especially if the bark is not clearly directed at anything identifiable to you.

- Does your dog systematically bark more than other dogs but interact well with other dogs and with all members of the family? If so, that amount of barking may be normal for your dog but inappropriate for the context (for example, living in an apartment with neighbors that are bothered by it). In this case, specific interventions that seek to decrease barking may be useful.
- Avoid stimuli that induce barking.
- Desensitize the dog to the stimuli. This means identifying a trigger that causes barking and repeating it at a very low level, then gradually increasing the intensity while praising lavishly when the dog does not bark. An example is barking when there is a knock at the door. For desensitization, simply record the knock and replay it at a lower volume. When your dog does not bark, give him/her extensive praise. However, when he/she does bark, distraction/diversion is the best response: offer him/her a chew toy that contains food (e.g., Kong toy), requiring him/her to use the mouth and therefore making barking at the same time impossible. Scolding or reprimanding systematically fails to improve the outcome of barking in dogs and should not be used.
- Reward quiet behavior. This is in the form of praise, a treat, or extra attention, as examples.

AFTERWARDS

Anti-bark devices and citronella collars may temporarily stop the barking, which offers an opportunity to begin training and desensitization. Such devices are rarely permanent solutions.

Immediately and consistently interrupt the barking pattern with diversionary or distractive activities.

Providing dogs with interaction (with you, with other people, with other dogs) is indispensable for managing a dog whose excessive barking is simply due to a desire for more attention. Physical activity (Frisbee, throwing the ball, going for a jog), obedience classes, and incorporation into leisure activities all can decrease the need for attention through barking.

Veterinary behaviorists are available for consultations. These specialist veterinarians are experts at determining the cause of the bark and providing solutions that are practical and as likely to succeed as anything else. You can ask your veterinarian for the name of a veterinary behaviorist in your area, or consult the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists website: www.veterinarybehaviorists.org.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

My dog only barks when I leave the house. What can I do?

A dog that barks when an owner leaves the house may suffer from separation anxiety. This is especially likely if the barking is accompanied by destructive behavior (chewing or destroying furniture, walls, etc.) A form of desensitization can consist of leaving the house briefly, returning to the house, and rewarding the dog positively. This helps the dog to learn that the owner will be returning. Then, gradually increasing the length of time away from the home, returning, and providing positive reinforcement can help extend the dog's bark-free period. Separation anxiety is a complex disorder that sometimes requires treatment with medications, and barking in this context should be brought up with your veterinarian or with a veterinary behaviorist (see above).

As described above, food-containing toys can distract a dog and divert the attention away from a stimulus for barking. Kong toys are available at pet stores; you simply place dog food or a treat within the toy, which distracts your dog for a period of time while you are away.

Does crate training help to stop barking?

Crates (carriers with a door that latches and that are kept inside the home) can provide a "safe" sanctuary for dogs. If your pet is feeling insecure and barks consistently, a crate may help eliminate the barking. For this to be successful, the crate must feel like home, not like jail. Ways of making the crate feel like home include placing it in the busiest part of the home (not off in a remote corner), feeding your dog in the crate exclusively, and leaving the crate door open at all times when you are home to allow easy circulation into and out of it. However, if your pet feels that a crate is punishment and has not been previously crate-trained, it may increase the potential for barking. Therefore, crate-training must be undertaken with an approach of putting all the chances on the side of the dog by making it feel like a home (as described above), and yet may still have to be abandoned if despite these precautions, a dog becomes more anxious or vocal when inside it with the door closed while you are away.

Practice Stamp or Name & Address