

"Bark! Bark! Bark!"

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Some canine behavior problems, such as house soiling, affect only a dog's owners. However, problems such as escaping and excessive barking can result in neighborhood disputes and violations of animal control ordinances. Therefore, barking dogs can become "people problems." If your dog's barking has created neighborhood tension, it might be a good idea to discuss the problem with your neighbors. It's perfectly normal and reasonable for dogs to bark from time to time, just as children make noise when they play outside. However, continual barking for long periods of time is a sign that your dog has a problem that needs to be addressed.

The first thing you need to do is determine when and for how long your dog barks, and what's causing him to bark. You may need to do some detective work to obtain this information, especially if the barking occurs when you're not home. Ask your neighbors, drive or walk around the block and watch and listen for a while, or start a tape recorder or video camera when you leave for work. Hopefully, you'll be able to discover which of the common problems discussed below is the cause of your dog's barking.

Social Isolation/Frustration/Attention-Seeking

Your dog may be barking because he's bored and lonely if:

- He's left alone for long periods of time without opportunities for interaction with you.
- His environment is relatively barren, without playmates or toys.
- He's a puppy or adolescent (under three years old) and doesn't have other outlets for his energy.
- He's a particularly active type of dog (like the herding or sporting breeds) who needs a "job" to be happy.

Recommendations:

Expand your dog's world and increase his "people time" in the following ways:

- Walk your dog daily - it's good exercise, both mental and physical.
- Teach your dog to fetch a ball or Frisbee and practice with him as often as possible.
- Teach your dog a few commands and/or tricks and practice them every day for five to ten minutes.
- Take an obedience class with your dog.
- Provide interesting toys to keep your dog busy when you're not home (Kong-type toys filled with treats or busy-box toys). Rotating the toys makes them seem new and interesting (see our handout: "Dog Toys and How to Use Them").
- If your dog is barking to get your attention, make sure he has sufficient time with you on a daily basis (petting, grooming, playing, exercising) so he doesn't have to resort to misbehaving to get your attention.
- Keep your dog inside when you're unable to supervise him.
- Let your neighbors know that you're actively working on the problem.
- Take your dog to work with you every now and then, if possible.
- When you have to leave your dog for extended periods of time, take him to a "doggie day care" or have a friend or neighbor walk and/or play with him.

Territorial/Protective Behavior

Your dog may be barking to guard his territory if:

- The barking occurs in the presence of "intruders," which may include the mail carrier, children walking to school and other dogs or neighbors in adjacent yards.
- Your dog's posture while he's barking appears threatening - tail held high and ears up and forward.
- You've encouraged your dog to be responsive to people and noises outside.

Recommendations:

- Teach your dog a "quiet" command. When he begins to bark at a passer-by, allow two or three barks, then say "quiet" and interrupt his barking by shaking a can filled with pennies or squirting water at his mouth with a spray bottle or squirt gun. This will cause him to stop barking momentarily. While he's quiet, say "good quiet" and pop a tasty treat into his mouth. Remember, the loud noise or squirt isn't meant to punish him, rather it's to startle him into being quiet so you can reward him. If your dog is frightened by the noise or squirt bottle, find an alternative method of interrupting his barking (throw a toy or ball toward him).
- Desensitize your dog to the stimulus that triggers the barking. Teach him that the people he views as intruders are actually friends and that good things happen to him when these people are around. Ask someone to walk by your yard, starting far enough away so that your dog isn't barking, then reward him for quiet behavior as he obeys a "sit" or "down" command. Use a very special food reward such as little pieces of cheese or meat. As the person gradually comes closer, continue to reward his quiet behavior. It may take several sessions before the person can come close without your dog barking. When the person can come very close without your dog barking, have them feed him a treat or throw a toy for him.
- If your dog barks while inside the house when you're home, call him to you, have him obey a command, such as "sit" or "down," and reward him with praise and a treat.
- Don't inadvertently encourage this type of barking by enticing your dog to bark at things he hears or sees outside.
- Have your dog neutered (or spayed if your dog is a female) to decrease territorial behavior.

Fears And Phobias

Your dog's barking may be a response to something he's afraid of if:

- The barking occurs when he's exposed to loud noises, such as thunderstorms, firecrackers, or construction equipment.
- Your dog's posture indicates fear - ears back, tail held low.

Recommendations:

- Identify what's frightening your dog and desensitize him to it (see our handout: "Helping Your Dog Overcome the Fear of Thunder and Other Startling Noises"). You may need professional help with the desensitization process. Check with your veterinarian about anti-anxiety medication while you work on behavior modification.
- Mute noise from outside by leaving your dog in a basement or windowless bathroom and leave on a television, radio or loud fan. Block off your dog's access to outdoor views that might be causing a fear response, by closing curtains or doors to certain rooms.

Separation Anxiety

Your dog may be barking due to separation anxiety if:

- The barking occurs only when you're gone and starts as soon as, or shortly after, you leave.
- Your dog displays other behaviors that reflect a strong attachment to you, such as following you from room to room, frantic greetings or reacting anxiously to your preparations to leave.
- Your dog has recently experienced: a change in the family's schedule that results in his being left alone more often; a move to a new house; the death or loss of a family member or another family pet; or a period at an animal shelter or boarding kennel.

Recommendations:

- Separation anxiety can be resolved using counter-conditioning and desensitization techniques (see our handout: "Separation Anxiety").

Bark Collars

Bark collars are specially designed to deliver an aversive whenever your dog barks. There are several different kinds of bark collars:

- **Citronella Collar:** This collar contains a reservoir of citronella solution that sprays into your dog's face every time he barks. A citronella collar is considered humane and a recent study reported an 88% rate of success with the use of this collar. One possible drawback is that the collar contains a microphone, so the aversive is delivered in response to the sound of the bark. Therefore, other noises may set off the collar, causing your dog to be sprayed even if he hasn't barked. Also, some dogs can tell when the citronella reservoir is empty and will resume barking.
- **Aversive Sound Collar:** This collar emits a high-frequency sound when your dog barks. Some are activated by the noise of the bark, while others are hand-held and activated by a handler. The rate of success for this type of collar is reportedly rather low.
- **Electric Shock Collar:** We don't recommend an electric shock collar to control your dog's barking. The electric shock is painful to your dog and many dogs will choose to endure the pain and continue barking. The success rate of this type of collar is less than 50%.

The main drawback of any bark collar is that it doesn't address the underlying cause of the barking. You may be able to eliminate the barking, but symptom substitution may occur and your dog may begin digging, escaping, or become destructive or even aggressive. The use of a bark collar must be in conjunction with behavior modification based on the reason for the barking, as outlined above. You should never use a bark collar on your dog if his barking is due to separation anxiety, fears or phobias, because punishment always makes fear and anxiety behaviors worse.