



## **Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals**

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### **"Too Much Barking!"**

Excessive barking is one of the most common problems associated with owning a dog. While it is normal for every dog to bark at times, incessant barking can be a symptom of a behavior issue causing stress in your dog. Constant canine vocalization can also be a source of consternation for your neighbors, causing them to complain or even place a call to the local authorities.

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 is bored and seeks interaction from you, if at least one of the following is true:

- 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 3 years old) and doesn't have other outlets for his energy.
- His barking is accompanied by pawing at your hands and/or lap and ceases when you pet him or talk to him.
- He's a particularly active type 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 is good exercise, both mentally and physically. Make sure that your walks are long and brisk enough to expend a noticeable amount of your dog's energy.
- After reaching physical maturity (at about 18 months), your dog can go for a jog with you. Take your dog for short jogs at first, then slowly increase the distance you cover. Dogs historically meant to complete physically exhausting tasks, like Labrador retrievers, Border Collies, and Siberian Huskies, can really appreciate a good run. Don't forget to get approval from your vet before taking part in more strenuous activities.
- Teach your dog to play ball, Frisbee, or tug and practice with him as often as possible.
- Teach your dog a few commands and/or tricks and practice them multiple times every day for five to ten minute sessions.
- 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 peanut butter mixed with kibble or Buster Cube 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 are 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.

### **Don't Reward Pushiness (Even by Accident)**

Remember that dogs that bark for attention do so because they have been rewarded many times in the past for barking with your attention (yelling and pushing counts as attention to many dogs). In some cases, people inadvertently teach their dogs to demand-bark by telling their barking dogs to sit and giving them a treat, thinking that they are rewarding their dogs for sitting quietly. In reality, they are teaching their dogs the following behavior chain:

I bark → Mom says, "Sit." → I sit → Mom gives me liver treats.

What it really comes down to is this:

I bark → Mom gives me liver treats.

*Never reward your dog by petting him, pushing him, shouting at him, talking to him, commanding him, or even making eye contact with him when he is barking for attention.* Any of these responses will simply reward his barking. Instead, simply ignore him and make sure that the attention-seeking barking is not reinforced.

### **Prevention is Key**

In addition to making sure that attention-seeking barking goes unrewarded, it is also imperative that you show your dog that there are acceptable ways to gain your attention. Any forms of attention should only take place when your dog is quiet. The more you reward your dog for quietly sitting or lying down, the more likely he is to perform these quiet, desirable behaviors.

You can also prevent bouts of barking before they begin by watching your dog for signs that he is about to start. By now, you are probably familiar with your dog's unique pre-bark behavior. Maybe he paces, whines, looks at you expectantly, yawns, or pants? As soon as you see this pre-bark behavior, redirect him into a more appropriate activity, like chewing Kong stuffed with extra high value treats (Think peanut butter or spreadable cheese. Milkbones just don't cut it for most dogs). If your dog is loud and pushy, keeping him from practicing demand barking and teaching him appropriate ways of earning your attention will no doubt go a long way towards making him a quieter pal.

### **Territorial/Protective Behavior**

Your dog may be barking to guard his territory if:

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

### **Recommendations:**

- Keep Rover from barking by removing his triggers: the sights and sounds of people/animals walking around your house. Draw the curtains, close the door, and/or put a baby gate up so that his access to outside stimuli is limited.
- Teach your dog 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 doesn't bark. As the person comes into view, give your dog very special food rewards such as little pieces of cheese or meat. Continue to dole out the treats until the person is out of sight, then take the treats away. You will be teaching your dog "*Stranger equals amazing treats. No stranger equals no treats.*" When Rover has developed a positive association between strangers and treats, he will begin looking at you in anticipation of the treat when the stranger draws near. At this point, it is okay for the stranger to walk *a little* bit closer to the house. The difficulty level of this exercise must be raised very slowly to ensure that your dog never practices barking at strangers. It may take several sessions before the person can come close without your dog barking. Remember to change the stranger frequently, varying age, size, gender, dog/no dog, so that your dog is conditioned to accept different strangers and not just the original one!

- Don't inadvertently encourage this type of barking by talking excitedly to your dog, saying phrases such as "What's that?! Who's there?!" when there is movement outside.
- Having your dog neutered (or spayed if it is a female) may also have a positive affect on 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: stiff or shivering, ears back, tail held low or tucked.

### **Recommendations:**

- Identify the source of your dog's fear 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.
- Just as with territorial barking, limit your dog's contact with the noises or sights that are frightening him. 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 are gone and starts as soon 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 greeting, 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. 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 has not barked. Some dogs can tell when the citronella reservoir is empty and will continue 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:** 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%.

**We do not recommend the use of collars to control your dogs' barking.** The main drawback of any bark collar is that it does not 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 the punishment always makes fear and anxiety behaviors worse. **We do not recommend the use of any bark collar without first consulting a behavior specialist. Try calling HSPCA Behavior and Training at 713-869-7722, ext. 178 or emailing us at [animals@hspca.org](mailto:animals@hspca.org).**