

NOISY CANINES

Most dogs get noisy when exposed to anything new or unusual. The stimuli that trigger noise can vary from dog to dog and from household to household. This vocalization can come in the form of barking, whining, growling, or howling.

Why All the Racket?

Many situations can lead to barking:

- Strangers or other animals entering the dog's property
- Sight of prey, such as a squirrel running through the yard
- Separation from their pack, mother, or family members
- Novel sounds, such as a smoke detector alarm
- Need for attention, food, or affection
- Other anxieties or high states of arousal

Growling is associated with fearful or assertive displays. Whenever growling or barking is successful at achieving the pet's goals (e.g., the treat is chased away) the dog feels rewarded. Subsequently, the growling will likely become more frequent or intense.

Medical problems can contribute to vocalization, and senile changes may lead to barking problems in older pets. In some cases where barking becomes intense, repetitive, and difficult to interrupt, it may be deemed compulsive. Pets with medical, geriatric, and compulsive disorders may benefit from drug therapy along with behavioral retraining techniques.

Prevention Starts Early

Socializing puppies to a variety of new people, animals, environments, and noises can reduce anxieties as the dog grows up. Owner control, training, and leadership are also essential. While young, the dog should learn to spend some of its time playing or relaxing by itself, perhaps in its bed or crate so that it's not too distressed when it must be left alone.

When you give in to your dog's demands, it barking is rewarded. Allowing a barking dog to come indoors, or feeding, praising, playing with, or even just going to it to quiet it, may encourage barking.

Take Control Early

Enroll your pet in puppy socialization and training classes as soon as possible. Then, teach him that you are in control by using obedience commands. Ask him to sit before giving him things he wants or needs, and occasionally command him to stay for a second or two before following you around the home or stairs or going through a doorway.

Correcting Bad Habits

Correcting a barking problem requires an understanding of the situations and stimuli that initiate barking. Until effective control and leadership is established, training programs are unlikely to be successful. Increasing play and exercise, obedience training, and head halter training may be necessary before bark control can begin.

Once you have effective control over your dog, you can begin to train it to quiet down when barking begins. Training the dog to stop barking on command can be accomplished with lure reward techniques, disruption techniques, or head halter and leash training.

Begin training sessions with situations that are easily controlled (a family member knocking at the door) before proceeding to more difficult situations (a stranger coming to the door). Training a dog to be quiet on command allows it to continue to bark at stimuli but stop at your request. Rewards are then given for quiet behavior. At each subsequent training session the dog should remain quiet a little longer before the reward is given. Teaching a dog to stop barking in the presence of the stimulus is much more difficult. To be successful, barking must be interrupted immediately as it begins, and the process repeated until the dog does not bark at the stimulus (at which time it can be rewarded).

Punishment is generally ineffective in the control and correction of barking problems. Excessive punishment can increase anxiety and further aggravate the problem, while insufficient punishment merely rewards the behavior by providing

attention. For punishment to be effective, barking must be disrupted at the instant it begins, using a technique or device that effectively interrupts the barking. When you are not present as barking begins, the only solution might be to use bark-activated products. But unless the dog is also trained to be quiet in the presence of the stimulus, devices will only disrupt, not eliminate barking habits.

Practical Products

There are several products that may successfully interrupt barking. Owner-activated devices are often effective at disrupting barking and achieving a quiet response. Devices include ultrasonic trainers, audible alarms, water sprayers, and shake cans (an empty soda can with coins or pebbles sealed inside).

Bark-activated products are often the most practical means of deterring inappropriate barking, and may be a better choice than owner-activated devices since they ensure immediate and accurate timing. They are also effective in training the dog to stop barking in selected areas. Off-collar, bark-activated alarms or water sprayers are useful for training the dog to cease barking in specific locations. Bark-activated collars are practical when barking does not occur in a single, specific location. Audible and ultrasonic collars are occasionally effective but seldom a reliable deterrent. Citronella-spraying collars are effective with most dogs. Electronic shock collars are a final option. Since they have the potential for injury or abuse, discuss this option with your veterinarian.

As soon as the barking ceases, take the opportunity to direct the dog into appropriate behavior, such as play, so the problem diminishes over time.

A Last Resort

Surgical devocalization is a drastic method of eliminating barking. In some cases it is permanently effective at removing all vocalization. But in many cases, varying degrees of noise may return as the surgical site heals and scars. Devocalization may need to be considered when no other approach has been successful and you must resolve the problem or give up the dog.

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