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BC SPCA - Excessive Barking

RECOGNIZING THE PROBLEM

Recognizing a barking problem isn't usually difficult. It either annoys you, your neighbours or both. Dogs bark for many different reasons. Figuring out why your dog is barking is the first and most important step to treating the problem. Dogs bark for the following reasons:

- Breed
- Anxiety
- Attention Seeking
- Boredom
- Over Excitement
- Territorial

TRAINING OPTIONS

Breed: Though it is natural for all dogs to bark, certain breeds were bred specifically for the job of barking to keep intruders away from what they are meant to protect such as a flock of sheep. However, some dogs use this natural behaviour at inappropriate times or too much, and continue to bark when the threat is long gone. With some training and patience, even dogs bred to bark but use barking inappropriately, can learn when barking is OK and for how long.

Dogs that bark when left alone may be bored or suffer from separation anxiety or be over stimulated by sounds.

Boredom: Keeping your dog occupied by providing toys that make him engage in playful "work" such as a frozen stuffed Kong, or a treat dispensing toy, will prevent barking for a long period time. Always make sure your dog gets enough exercise before he is left alone so that he will sleep for at least part of the time you will not be around.

Anxiety: Some dogs bark because they are distressed being left alone. They have separation anxiety. Separation anxiety is an emotional disorder and must be treated or the barking will not stop even with toys and lots of activity before being left alone (see [?Preventing and Reducing Anxiety When Left Alone?](#) fact sheet).

Over Excitement: Some dogs bark because noises stimulate them. They get themselves wound up and do not stop barking. These dogs must be desensitized to sounds.

How to desensitize your dog to sounds:

Step 1

The key to controlling undesirable barking is to teach the dog a more appropriate behaviour to replace the barking. Barking often becomes a problem because the guardian has likely inadvertently reinforced the behaviour by giving some form of attention to the dog once the dog started barking. Do not pick up the dog and cuddle him, restrain him by pulling back on their collar, tell them "it's OK" or give him a treat to distract him.

Instead, use a taped can filled with pebbles, keys or in some cases a special citronella collar controlled by a remote activator in your hand. Throw the can, keys next to your dog (not at him) or push on the remote to deliver a citronella spray as soon as the barking starts (between 30 and 60 seconds max). This will distract your dog long enough to let you reward the quiet behaviour. Say "good quiet" and reward with a treat.

Step 2:

Good obedience is essential. You can increase your dog's ability to remain quiet during training sessions of about 2 minutes. Ask your dog for a "sit quiet" behaviour. Give a treat and a "good sit quiet." For the next part ask a helper to be outside ready to knock on the door. On cue, your helper knocks as you ask your dog for the third "sit quiet." If your dog remains focused on you and quiet, give him an enthusiastic "good sit quiet" and a treat. If your dog barks, turn away and ignore him. After a few seconds turn around ask for the "sit quiet" again, then reward if appropriate.

With some dogs you may need to have a third person that will throw the can or keys next to your dog during the training session to distract the dog and make the barking stop. If you succeed, the next reward is going to the door with you to welcome the visitor. Increase your dog's ability to stay focused on you while you expose him to different sounds. You can purchase CDs or make a tape of the sounds that make your dog bark and play the sounds during training sessions to practice "sit quiet" with these different sounds. (Also see our fact sheet on [Preventing and Reducing Excitable Behaviour.](#))

Attention Seeking: Many dogs bark to get attention or to make their guardian do "something" such as take them out or play with them. Many dogs learn that this works because many guardians pay more attention to their dog when he is being demanding. Teach your dog to ask for things (food, treats, pats, going out, coming up on the couch, etc.) politely.

How to teach your dog to sit and be quiet in order to get what he wants:

Step 1: Teach him the "sit quiet" command as outlined above.

Step 2: Teach him that barking, whining, pawing, pushing or any other demanding behaviour gets him nothing. When your dog demands love, food, play or anything, ignore him until he sits.

To reinforce the previously learned "sit quiet" your dog has to figure out for himself (even if not asked) that this is what gets your attention. Ignore the demanding behaviour, say nothing and do not look at him directly. Remember, your dog may try a few things such as barking louder or leaning harder. When these behaviours do not work, he will try sitting quietly. Once he sits quietly, turn to him and give him a very enthusiastic "good sit quiet" and then get up and give him what he was after such as a play session, a walk or a treat. Once you use this technique you must ensure that do the same technique consistently (including all other family members) or your dog will become confused and you will not get the learned behaviour change.

Territorial: Most dogs are territorial to some extent. Most dogs also bark when a person enters the property or knocks at the door. The problem is when the dog refuses to stop barking on command or becomes aggressive. Never leave your dog unsupervised or chained in the yard. If he is teased by children or threatened by a dog walking by, this will increase his need to bark and threaten people or animals walking by. The best way to prevent territorial barking is to introduce your dog to the people who enter your property (with permission), and to have him associate their presence with a positive outcome.

For example, introduce your dog to the mail carrier. Ask him/her to give your dog a cookie. Then leave cookies at the door and ask the mail carrier to put one through the mail slot with the mail every day. If your dog has been properly introduced and still barks use a distracter such as throwing a rattle can next to him when he barks. Reward him for being quiet with a "good quiet" and a treat.

VETERINARY HELP

There may be health reasons why your dog is barking. Excessive barking can be a sign of separation anxiety. Ask your veterinarian about treatments such as Dog Appeasing Pheromones or for extreme cases anti-anxiety drugs. Deaf dogs may become excessive barkers. Liver disease may be a cause of intermittent deafness. Geriatric dogs may start barking for no apparent reason because they are confused. Check with your veterinarian to ensure there are no health problems causing the excessive barking.

CAUTIONS/REMEMBER

Electric shock collars are marketed as a device for controlling unwanted behaviour such as barking. These devices cause distress. They are inhumane and should never be used.

Barking is natural behaviour for dogs. It is their form of communication. If your dog barks excessively it is important to determine why he is barking so that you can treat the problem correctly and be sure to never reinforce barking with positive or negative attention.

<http://www.sPCA.bc.ca/AnimalBehaviour/barking.asp>