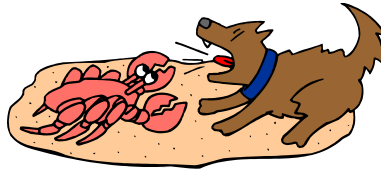


Managing Excessive Barking

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Excessive barking is a common complaint with dog owners (and their neighbors). Dogs bark for a variety of reasons: out of boredom, warning, lonely, fear, communication, to get attention, it is fun, etc. Some breeds, like many herding breeds, may be more vocal than others. For example, my beloved Shetland Sheepdogs is a breed known for being vocal. Shelties can be very vocal dogs! Training from day one when barking will and will not be permitted is very important! Many Shelties are given up each year due to barking. Many dogs PERIOD are given up each year due to barking. However, this need not be. Barking is a problem that can be worked with if you are consistent and diligent.

The easiest thing to do is NOT allow barking to get to be a bad habit. As soon as your puppy or dog joins your house, you need to start teaching what will and will not be allowed. Teach a cue that signals the barking is done. Use a calm, firm but not yelling voice and again, yelling can sound like barking and make the situation worse as you are barking as well! Show the dog that you really like it when he is quiet. Just shouting "NO" can sound like a bark and get your dog even more excited and barky! As soon as the dog stops barking, you need to reinforce the stopping of barking with a treat and praise. No puppy is born knowing any human developed commands or cues. You have to teach that each desired behavioral cue from us has an action and if that action is done, good things will follow. Positive motivation is a great training technique! Be careful not to inadvertently praise behaviors you do not want. Cuddling and stroking a barking dog may give the dog the impression you like what it is doing. The praise comes from quieting down. Avoid water sprays to the face as this can actually increase stress and the likelihood of barking over time. A good trainer can help you create a good, fun, humane training regiment for teaching a dog to quiet down.

Suppose you want the dog to alert bark when someone is at the door? Well, set up training scenarios. Have someone ring the bell or knock. Call the dog to you and have him escort you to the door. Ask excitedly "Who's there?" "Check it out!" or whatever cue you decide to use. Go to the door, have the dog sit and then have him stop barking. Praise and treat the stopping of barking. Teach him that when you get to the door and check out the situation, he can be quiet. Be consistent, be positive and be responsible. Practice several short sessions a day and the dog will eventually learn what you want. Stop undesired barking as soon as it starts. Positively reinforce the behaviors you want.

What if your dog is already nuisance barker? You can try several things. First, identify WHY your dog is barking: Lonely, alerting you to something, fear, bored, aggression, etc. Knowing the trigger or triggers is a big part in working towards a solution. If your dog is alerting you to something, teach him that when you have checked out a situation and you have told him it is fine, he must stop barking. My dogs learn that I want them to alert me to things on the property or that could pose a threat. As soon as I have checked it out and given the all clear, the dog does not need to alert me anymore. (I say, "Enough! It's fine" this is their cue that I have given the all clear and alerting me is no longer needed).

If your dog is bored or lonely, you need to get active with him. Toys, games, training, interaction all go a long way to help a bored or lonely dog. A tired dog is generally a better behaved dog. Boredom and loneliness can lead to other undesired behaviors as well. Get a variety of toys like Kongs, safe chew toys, Buster Cubes, etc., that will stimulate your dog's mind and get him doing something. Obedience lessons, Agility or other sport as well as just playing fetch will help. Do not leave your dog unsupervised while outside. Dogs who are outside all day especially when no one is home are more prone to becoming nuisance barkers for a variety of reasons listed above as well as a big one: NO ONE IS HOME TO TEACH HIM PROPER BEHAVIOR. If no one shows him what he can and cannot do, the issue will persist.

Some dogs are pathological barkers and intervention with a behaviorist may be needed if training does not work, you cannot find the source of the barking, etc. Sometimes just having a trainer or behaviorists watch your dog can help give you ideas. Often we cannot see the forest for the trees and we need an outsider to look at a situation in a different light.

Now, many people want a fast and easy way out and may resort to various collars that stop barking. If any training aid is used wrong, it can frustrate and possibly worsen the situation. Collars negatively reinforce the barking through a shock, noise, or spray with a scent dogs do not like. Some dogs learn to ignore the collars. Others may develop nervous behaviors or even aggressions due to the constant punishment. I have even seen dogs with severe neck burns from the collars because they kept barking, the owners turned up the shock and the dogs never stopped.

There is also a surgical procedure called Debarking or Bark Softening. This does not silence a dog at all. It causes the volume to decrease and the dog sound as if it has laryngitis. Debarking does not stop the problem, only helps cover it by dropping the volume. Your dog will still bark. Some debarks do not take well and the dog still can be quite loud. As with all surgeries, there are some risks, however, I have yet to meet a dog with any behavioral issues from this procedure. I have worked with dogs with a lot of behavioral issues from the use of anti-barking collars.

The best thing to do to help with barking is not to allow it to become a habit in the first place.

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