

The Communicating Canine, Better Known as the Barking Dog
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Some canine behavior problems, such as housesoiling, affect only a dog's owners, but problems such as escaping and excessive barking can result in neighborhood disputes and violations of animal control ordinances. Barking dogs can become "people problems" as well as dog problems. If a dog's barking has created neighborhood tensions, it might be a good idea to try to talk things over 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. Dogs are vocal creatures. On the other hand, continual barking for long time periods, or in the middle of the night, or at everything that moves, including leaves on the trees, is not only disturbing to people but is a sign that the dogs has a problem, which needs to be attended to. In order to understand the problem and know how to resolve it, we need to understand why dogs bark.

Dogs bark to communicate. They may be warning off what they perceive to be territorial intruders, they may bark during play, or when they're afraid, frustrated or bored. Barking can also become a way of getting what they want, such as to be let in the house or attention from their owners. That you need to do to help your dog bark let will depend on why she's barking. To decide why your dog is barking, you'll need to know when, how long, and at what your dog barks. Knowing what she looks like (what her body postures are) when she barks will also be helpful (does she look afraid, aggressive, playful, etc.). You may need to do some detective work to obtain all this information, especially if the barking is occurring when you aren't home. Ask several of your neighbors when the barking occurs (one neighbor may have a different opinion than another). Leave the house, drive around the block, park, and watch and listen for awhile (bring a book to read while you wait!). Or start a tape recorder when you leave the house for work. Based on the information you collect, you may be able to determine which of the common problems discussed below may be the cause of your dog's barking.

Separation Anxiety: This is one of the most common reasons dogs bark when they are left alone. Many dogs become anxious when they are left alone by their owners, even if there are other pets at home. A change in family routine, the death of another family pet, or recently being acquired from a shelter may trigger this problem. Dogs can manifest separation anxiety by barking, housesoiling, destructive behaviors, and/or escaping from the yard. Excessive barking due to separation anxiety will usually occur *only* in the owner's absence, or when the dog thinks the owner isn't home. The barking will usually start within 20 to 30 minutes of the owner's departure, and the dog will probably appear to be barking at nothing. The dog may look somewhat fearful, and may be barking near a gate or door through which the owner left or at a window through which the dog watched the owner leave.

Fear and Phobias: Dogs may bark when they are afraid. In the summertime, dogs are often frightened by thunderstorms and firecrackers. Cars back-firing, garbage trucks, hot air balloons (the WHOOSHING sound the gas makes), and gunshots are examples of other noises which commonly frighten dogs. Barking caused by these noise phobias will occur when the dog hears the noise. If the dog has been frightened frequently when in the yard, he may eventually bark whether the frightening stimulus is present or not, as the yard itself has become a frightening place to be. Dogs will look afraid (ears back, tail down) as they bark, and people watching them may not be able to determine what they are barking at.

Territorial/Protective Behavior: Dogs bark to warn or drive away what they perceive as intruders to their territory. From their perspective, this could be children walking to school, the mail carrier, cars, other dogs, squirrels, or neighbors in adjacent yards. The barking will occur in the presence of these intruders, and the dogs will appear threatening (tail high, ears up or forward). Owners may inadvertently contribute to this problem if they encourage the dog to alert to and be responsive to people and noises outside. Dogs may quickly learn to carry this behavior to extremes because from their point of view, barking successfully drives people away ("I bark, the mail carrier leaves").

Social Isolation/Frustration: Dogs are social animals. When left alone in a yard without any social companions for long time periods with nothing to do dogs often display frustration relieving behaviors such as barking and

digging. Barking gives them something to do when not much else is available to occupy their time. Most dogs will not play with tennis balls or squeaky toys by themselves. Dogs who spend long time periods without much attention from their owners may bark as an attention-getting behavior. Having an owner come out to the yard to verbally scold then may be better than being in the backyard alone. Dogs who are chained or confined to relatively small areas may be frustrated by this confinement and may bark for long time periods.

Resolving the Problem: In order to resolve a barking problem, the underlying cause of the problem must be addressed. If a dog is barking due to a separation anxiety problem, the dogs must learn how to be calm, relaxed and unafraid when left alone. If the problem is due to fears or phobias, techniques must be used which decrease the dog's fear and therefore her motivation to bark. Many severe fears and phobias require professional assistance to resolve.

For territorial barking, the dogs needs to learn that people he views as intruders are actually friends, and "good things" happen to him when these people are around. You can set up situations to work with your dog. Ask someone you know your dog will bark at to walk around by your yard, starting far enough away so that your dog isn't barking. Reward your dog for quiet behavior as he obeys a "sit" or "down" command. Use a very special food reward such as tiny pieces of cheese or meat. As the person gradually comes closer, continue to reward quiet behavior. If your dog barks, squirt him in the face with water from a spray bottle or squirt gun and/or verbally scold him. As soon as he is quiet, reward him with a tidbit. Repeat this process as the person slowly advances until your dog can be quiet while the person is present in the dog's territory. The "intruder" should then also give the dog several tidbits. Practice with a variety of people playing the "intruder". As your dog begins to anticipate the person's approach with friendly behavior and the barking decreases, you should move farther and farther away from your dogs during the training process. If your dog barks while inside then you are home, call your dog to you, have him obey a command such as "sit" or "down" and reward him with praise and a tidbit for doing so. In this case you are distracting your dog's attention, teaching him to do something else rather than bark, and rewarding him for going what you ask. Do not inadvertently encourage this type of barking by enticing your dog to bark at things he hears or sees outside. Neutering male dogs may also decrease territorial behavior.

If the barking is due to social isolation, frustration, or attention getting, the dog's environment and daily routine need to be modified. Owners may often leave dogs outside or chain them up because the dog also has problems if left alone inside or if he has the run of the yard. In this case, it may be more effective to resolve the problems which prevent the dog from being left inside or loose in the yard rather than trying to deal with the barking outside or when chained. Adding a dog door, allowing the dog more inside time, and giving the dog more to do in the yard may also be helpful. Big beach-ball size balls made of hard rubber which dogs can push around with their noses, and KONG toys filled with food are examples of toys dogs may play with when by themselves. These are available at many large pet stores. Owners also need to spend more time with their dogs by taking them for walks, playing fetch games, enrolling in an obedience class, and finding ways to include the dog in more family activities. Dogs who are ignored left in a yard by themselves the majority of the time WILL have problems.

Owners who have citations from animal control often want "quick fixes" for a barking problem in order to avoid additional fines and complaints. A bark collar may be seen as a way to take care of the problem immediately. If a dog is barking due to separation anxiety, fears or phobias, a bark collar SHOULD NEVER BE USED because punishment always makes fear and anxiety behaviors worse. In addition, unless the underlying cause is addressed, symptom substitution may occur. Instead of barking, the dog may instead begin digging, escaping, become destructive, aggressive, etc. if the motivation for the behavior is not dealt with. A bark collar can be useful for some types of barking if used appropriately. However, we suggest owners consult a professional animal behaviorist who is familiar with their use.