



# Barking

Dogs bark! It is normal canine behaviour.

Excessive barking may indicate a dog in suffering. Excessive barking can also affect the quality of life of the community.

There are many reasons dogs bark excessively. In order to solve your dog's barking problem, you will need to understand why he is barking.

Punishing the barking is often only treating a symptom and may result in producing another problem behaviour to replace the problem barking!

## Anxiety

Barking is a common way for a dog to relieve feelings of anxiety. If the dog is anxious because he is home alone, he may believe that barking will call you back home – the dog is right – you do come home! Treating the barking in this situation is a case of only treating a symptom. If you are successful in stopping the dog from barking by punishing the behaviour, the dog will still feel anxious in your absence and will still seek to relieve his anxiety – now he may turn to digging or chewing!

There are many varied treatments of anxiety in dogs, depending on the cause, the dog's history and the degree of anxiety being experienced. It is a whole separate subject that we will not attempt to cover here. However, the following is a short list of suggestions that may assist in improving confidence levels:

- Develop the dog's independence so that he is able to cope when his family is not with him. Independence building exercises include: crate training, tie-up or restraint exercise (see separate documents), increased variety in life (avoid patterns and routines) and a general increase in mental and physical stimulation. See document titled, "Some Good Advice for Owners of Adult and Adolescent Dogs".
- If your dog sleeps in your bedroom every night, it is likely that he wouldn't cope with sleeping away from you and this will be contributing to his inability to cope when he is not with you generally.

Use a crate if necessary. Start by having the dog sleep in the crate beside your bed. Gradually move the dog closer to the bedroom door – out the door – and ultimately into the laundry or other enclosed area. In the long term, it is fine for the dog to sleep beside your bed, or even on the bed... six nights a week. Sleeping away from you one night a week will be sufficient to ensure that the dog's independence in this respect is maintained.

- Vary the timing of regular activities including: meal times, walks, sleeping timeframes, when allowed access to indoors, etc.
- Use the dog's daily food intake to provide stimulation. The use of toys stuffed with his food and scattering his biscuits over a paved or grass area for him to find, will stimulate canine scavenging tendencies.

Vary the location of his meals, the frequency, time of day and which family member serves the meal. Also try handfeeding him his meal on occasions or giving him his meal whilst out on a walk.

- After having introduced much variety in the way the dog obtains his daily nutrition, introduce occasions where you show the dog his biscuits, food-stuffed toy or raw meaty bones and allow him to watch you scatter the biscuits or place the toy or bone in the yard for him. Initially give him access to the food after only five or ten seconds of restraint. Over the next few days, start to vary the time the dog is restrained from the food up to ten minutes. Over the following couple of weeks, vary the time restrained up to 40 minutes. Ensure that this programme is carried out at varying times of day.

Now, we can prepare the dog's meal as outlined above at some varied timeframe before we are planning to leave the home. Vary what happens after the food has been set: sometimes you might dress ready to leave; make a cuppa and watch television; other times you might take him for a walk or conduct a training session. At varying timeframes, before you walk out the door, give the dog access to the food.

To minimise the risk that the dog will come to associate this new feeding regime with you leaving, ensure that it is also regularly implemented when you are not leaving the home.

This tactic will also be appropriate for bored dogs.

- Exercise the dog off-territory for at least 40 minutes every day.
- Introduce or progress training of tricks or obedience exercises using reward-based techniques; this helps support a more positive outlook on life.
- Using forms of punishment to stop the anxious dog from barking will most often result in increased levels of anxiety, as will showing your annoyance at the dog on returning home to barking.

## Boredom

- Exercise the dog off-territory for at least 40 minutes every day.
- Introduce or progress training of tricks or obedience exercises using reward-based techniques.

- Play games with the dog such as hide and seek his favourite toy – start off easy until he understands the game and then gradually make the hiding spot more and more difficult.
- Use the dog’s daily food intake to provide stimulation of scavenging – see above for “Anxiety”.
- Consider hiring a dog walker to break up your dog’s day.
- If you have covered all of the previous points, you could consider a spray collar. One type uses citronella spray, a scent the dog is not fond of and another simply sprays a puff of air into the dog’s face. I prefer the puff of air type. The citronella tends to spray into the dog’s coat and the dog permanently smells of citronella – sort of defeats the purpose!

Both types are available in bark responsive or remote control. If you do utilise these products, remember that they are a form of punishment and there is a risk of associating that punishment with whatever the dog is focused on at the time. For example, if the dog received a spray every time he barked at a visitor at the front door, he would start to associate the punishment with visitors. Consequently, he is likely to strongly dislike visitors and may take action to “see them off”.

Before using any form of punishment, you must consider the possible associations the dog will form to it. If in doubt, please call for further discussion.

**Do not use a spray collar if the dog’s barking is directed at other dogs, people or children. The dog is likely to form an association between the punishment and the focus of his attention. This can lead to aggression directed towards the target of his barking.**

The Spray Commander collar is available through: [www.absaustralia.com](http://www.absaustralia.com)

- Remember that an adult dog will sleep for up to 16 hours a day. If you can provide plenty of mental and physical stimulation, the dog will then spend much of the remaining time asleep.

## Barking at Passers-by

Dogs that are able to see and/or hear people and other dogs walking by and respond by barking at them are potentially learning a dangerous association.

From the dog's point of view, someone approaches his territory - he barks and the person retreats. It probably started out as a tentative bark, but with experience the dog becomes more and more confident in his powers of intimidation. He knows that people attempting to approach his territory will back down when he intimidates them (barks at them). With sufficient experience, this dog may become confident to follow-through with a bite if he happens to be free of the boundaries when someone approaches.

It is no coincidence that the postman is the most commonly bitten person in our community – every day he approaches, even touches our property, but runs away when the dog barks.

Punishments such as a spray collar would *not* be appropriate in this situation. We have already allowed the dog to learn a dangerous lesson – the collar would simply further increase the dog's dislike of people walking by. If the dog is focused on people when he barks and consequently receives a punishing spray, he is likely to associate the punishment with the person walking by.

Yelling at the dog from the house is likely to be misinterpreted by the dog. He may believe that you are yelling at the person/dog walking by – just like him. You are backing him up. It becomes a family activity to bark and yell at people/dogs passing by.

**When a person scolds or yells at a dog, they generally believe they are punishing the dog's current behaviour. Sadly, this is rarely the dog's interpretation!**

Alternatively, the dog may form the opinion that you are a pleasant person usually, but people walking by cause you to become aggressive towards him. Of course, the dog does not want people/dogs to walk by to make you angry with him.

During the behaviour modification training, we must stop the dog from being able to bark at passers-by. The dog must be either removed from the situation or barriers constructed so that he cannot see the passers-by. Closing blinds on windows is not a good option as the dog will probably damage the

blinds in attempts to see out. It will be more successful to cover the outside of the window – newspaper and blu-tac will do the job temporarily. Tarpaulins might be necessary.

Set-up a situation using disguised family members (coat, hat, different walk), or friends walking by. Use mobile phones to co-ordinate timing.

Take the dog on lead to the place where he commonly barks at people/dogs walking by. Take ten or more steps back from his usual position. Have his favourite food treats ready and ensure that he is keen for the treats ie he hasn't just had a meal.

As a person and/or dog approach, speak in a happy animated voice: "Oh look, here comes someone – isn't that great – I'm so happy! Blah, blah, blah!" It doesn't matter what you say – just say it in happy, relaxed tones of voice. You are demonstrating to your dog how you feel towards others approaching your place. Give the dog plenty of his favourite treats. If possible greet the person as they pass by.

If the dog does not take your lead and instead, barks in his usual manner, you will need to immediately retreat. The intensity of the situation was too high. Try again from an increased distance. Do *not* verbally or physically correct the dog as that will reinforce his current beliefs that people/dogs walking by are a bad thing.

Once you have identified the distance from which the dog can observe people going by and accept a food treat, you have found your dog's threshold. It is always preferable to commence your programme under threshold, but if you blow it, move back quickly and aim to never breach it again. With experience the threshold will gradually increase and you will be able to move closer, ever so gradually. Tiny steps of success are better than giant leaps of failure!

The aim is to change the dog's associations and expectations of people/dogs walking by. By doing so, the aim of his behaviour changes from distance-increasing (to make people move away) to distance-decreasing (to encourage people to approach).

**During the behavioural modification training, you must ensure that the dog cannot perform incorrectly when you are not there to supervise. The dog must not be left unattended in the situation to be able to practise bad habits.**

To further enhance the dog's learning, you could stop feeding his regular meals and make him entirely dependent on people walking by for his daily food requirements.

Progress will need to be made in gradual steps. The ultimate goal is the dog keen to see people/dogs approach in the hope that it predicts something good for him.

Once the dog is looking to you for food treats when he spies a person or dog approaching, you can then start to have the passer-by toss the food to the dog.

## Consequence of Behaviour

Often problem barking has come about simply because it has proven to be a very successful behaviour for the dog. For example: You are talking to your friend, ignoring your dog – the dog barks – you both look at him. Or, the dog has been shut outside – the family is watching television – the dog barks – the family ignore him at first (they don't want to reinforce barking) – Mum starts to worry that the barking will irritate the neighbours, so she lets him in to keep him quiet. This little dog has also learnt to persevere with the barking until it works! He accepts that it may not work immediately.

Whenever you're dealing with problem behaviour, you will increase your chances of success if you can provide the dog with an alternative behaviour that will be successful in achieving what it was that he wanted in the first place. For example: When the dog barks for attention, withhold your attention by looking away; but ensure that you do pay attention from time to time whilst the dog is holding a sitting position and focusing on your face.

Consequence of barking at the back door to be let in: If the doors are glass, remove visual contact by closing blinds or use newspaper with blu-tac. After the dog has been quiet for at least ten seconds, visual contact can be re-established. Alternatively, keep a bottle or jug of water and a cup by the door. Every time the dog barks, open the door a crack and splash a cup of water in his face (a water squirter maybe sufficient). Perform this action in silence and minimise eye contact. Do not use this technique with a dog that is barking out of anxiety or fear. These methods will not work if the dog is occasionally successful with the barking. You must be consistent.

Consequence of barking whilst indoors: You will interpret the dog's bark as an urgent request to be put outside or into a small room such as the laundry or bathroom. The dog is not "in trouble" – you will joyfully fulfil his request. It goes without saying that you will not be cross with the dog or say, "NO". Remain silent; allow your actions to speak louder than words. The dog only has to be in there for a minute or two – only allow him back out if he is behaving perfectly.

If the dog keeps out of your reach when he barks, tie a lead to his collar to drag around whilst he is in the house - that will make it easier for you to follow through.

Consequence of barking during play: Game over! The instant the dog barks in excitement during a game with you or with another dog, you will abruptly remove him from the game for at least 20 seconds. You will only allow him to return to the game after at least ten seconds of perfect behaviour. The dog is not "in trouble" – you will remain pleasant – the dog is simply experiencing the consequence of barking in excitement: he is removed from the exciting stimulus. Time-out in the laundry, bathroom, crate or tie-up would be appropriate.

Consequence of barking during dog training class: Step backwards with the dog, away from the exciting stimulus of other dogs and/or people. Say nothing; allow your actions to speak louder than words. Keep on stepping backwards until you reach a point where the dog can calm down. After at least ten seconds of quietness, you can start returning to the group. At the first bark (even a little one), move backwards again.

Consequence of barking at the dog/cat/kids next door: Call the dog to "Come" away from the stimulus. You can even reward the recall. If the recall is not strong enough to do this, you will have to attach a lead to the dog to trail so that you can remove him physically. Again, not "in trouble", simply removed from something he is finding stimulating. The result in this situation should be that the dog learns that he can be interested, even run up and down the fence line, but his fun will be interrupted if he opens his mouth. Remember that yelling at the dog is likely to be misinterpreted and possibly even build a dangerous association to the stimulus that the dog is focused on when you yell.

**Don't yell!**

The aforementioned techniques are only some of the many possible solutions to the problem of excessive barking. You must consider the reason your dog is barking in order to identify the most appropriate course of action.