



CHRONIC AND/OR EXCESSIVE BARKING

Unfortunately words like “chronic” and “excessive” are subjective. What is chronic and excessive to one person may not be to another and vice versa. Dogs ARE going to bark at times. The question is whether the barking is chronic and/or excessive. Your dog MAY be barking chronically or excessively if:

1. The dog barks continually and/or in a pattern (pattern barking is bark, bark, bark, pause, bark, bark, bark, pause, or any other combination of barks and pauses that is repetitious.),
2. The dog barks at anything and everything, including falling leaves or high-flying birds.

Once you determine that you do have a problem barker, you must accept that, however inadvertently, you may have encouraged your dog to bark by:

1. Going to a door or window and yelling at the dog to stop,
2. Encouraging your dog to bark at anyone or anything,
3. Confining the dog in a crate, kennel, or on a tether for long periods,
4. Attempting to address the dog's needs, i.e. fed it, petted it, consoled it, when it was barking.

Dogs bark for a variety of reasons. Those reasons include, but are not limited to, sounding an alarm about intruders, boredom, frustration, loneliness, and expressing its demands to go out or play or something similar. Problem barking results when a dog LEARNS by barking that it can expect to be REWARDED. Dog barks and dog gets (fill in the blank) or owner does (fill in the blank.)

Before a chronic or excessive barking problem can be resolved, it is necessary to understand what causes the behavior. The act of barking excites the dog and is, to some extent, a reward in and of itself. If a dog, however erroneously, believes its owner likes its barking, its behavior is reinforced. A tiny amount of even unintentional reinforcement can cause an otherwise well-behaved dog to develop a serious barking problem.

Some of the causes of chronic and/or excessive barking are:

1. Intruders. Dogs are, by nature, territorial and bark to warn intruder the dog is willing to defend its territory. Warning barks can be advantageous and desirable. However, some dogs come to believe that any and every human, animal, or object that comes into the range of their sight, hearing or smelling is a potential threat. When this happens, an owner may find the dog much more reactive than the owner wanted.

Why does this happen? Although it may come as a surprise to many owners, dogs often interpret our behavior much differently than we intend the dog to interpret it. Owners may inadvertently encourage the dog's barking through their actions, actions that convey to the dog that the owner LIKES the dog's barking or aggressive behavior. This can happen even if the owner believes he/she is doing everything possible to stop the behavior.

Look at this situation from the dog's perspective. The dog gets excited and begins to bark. The owner, agitated, sticks his head out the door or window and yells at the dog to stop barking. The dog, not understanding the owner's words but perceiving the annoyance in the owner's voice, thinks that the owner is joining in to voice disapproval at the intruder. And, as if that were not enough, the barking has gotten the owner's attention and created an opportunity for the dog to interact with the owner. From the owner's perspective, the interaction is negative. From the dog's perspective something entirely different has happened. Even if the dog realizes you are angry at it, it may consider interacting with you worth your disapproval. To a dog, it is better for the two of you to interact negatively than not to interact at all.

Further, some owners intentionally or unintentionally encourage their dogs to react to any novel situation with either barking and/or a show of aggression.

2. Loneliness, boredom and frustration. Most owners do not understand how critical social interaction is to dogs. Dogs are extremely social animals. They need and crave attention and stimulation. Without attention and stimulation, sooner or later a dog will manifest what, in humans, is the equivalent of mental and/or emotional problems. In dogs we call it “bad” or “problem” behaviors. Potential problem behaviors vary, but chronic and/or excessive barking is usually a symptom of a dog’s stress or distress arising out of loneliness, boredom or frustration. It is important to remember that dogs need a great deal of exercise, attention and stimulation. A dog left alone, confined, and without any form of stimulation, is a ticking time bomb of behavioral problems.

Remember, if a dog barks and learns its barking gets results, the barking will increase. If a dog barks and learns that barking does not get results, the barking will decrease. Barking can become such an established behavior that intervention may be necessary to teach the dog to exercise control over its barking.

Never let your dog think its barking causes you to do something the dog wants. Increase the dog’s exercise level significantly, do NOT feed the dog performance foods (look for 16 to 20% protein feeds), and find games or train various commands or tricks to challenge your dog’s mind and natural instincts.

Scheduling is also important. It gives your dog a sense of security. This helps the dog realize at certain times you will do certain things, like feed it, take it for walks, etc. Scheduling teaches a dog that you, not the dog, makes decisions about when something occurs and that the dog does not control your actions but that its needs will be met at the appropriate time.

Sometimes the method of confinement alone can cause boredom and/or frustration. Crates, kennels, and short tethers all may cause potential problems if a dog is confined for long periods. Owners frequently and unintentionally cause barking in their dogs by releasing the dog from confinement when it is excited and barking. For instance, the owner has been gone all day and comes home. The dog is excited to see the owner. The dog is barking and the owner goes to the dog and releases it from its confinement. The owner has, in effect, rewarded the dog for barking. This dog has been taught to believe that when it barks the owner will release it. Once this point is reached, if the owner fails to release the dog promptly when it barks, the barking will get louder and more frequent. To the dog’s way of thinking, barking worked last time why isn’t it working this time? So, what does the dog do? It cranks up the volume or number of barks in an attempt to get the desired result. NEVER release an excited, barking dog from confinement unless you want more of that same behavior. You must find a way to stop the dog from barking, possibly by giving it a treat, waiting until it stops barking, or by distracting it, before you release it. If you reach to release the dog and it starts barking, stop immediately and wait until the dog calms again..

3. Expressing a “demand.” Owners train a dog to do this type of barking. Owners may encourage their dogs to bark for treats or tidbits at the table, to go out, or to play. Once the dog realizes it can get its owner to do something barking, barking will increase.

Teach your dog what you consider to be appropriate or inappropriate barking behavior. If you do not want a dog to bark at the table, do not reward its barking with food or attention. Ignore the barking completely. Although initially the barking may increase because the dog is frustrated because barking has worked before but is not now working, it will eventually get the message and not bother. Dogs do what works for them.

“Demand” barking, combined the confinement frustration, is often why a dog barks when left at home alone. The dog is bored, frustrated and wants you to come home. Stimulating “toys” that keep your dog entertained are a potential solution. You may also want to leave on a television or radio and a light or two so the dog does not perceive a radical change in its environment between when you are at home and when you are not at home.

It should also be noted that many owners “set” their dogs up for demand barking by “pre-conditioning” the dog to bark. This happens when an owner gets a puppy, brings it into the home, plays with it and/or otherwise lavishes attention it for weeks or months OR teaches it to bark for treats or attention, and finally, for whatever reason, decides they no longer want the dog to be a “house” dog and banish it to the yard. The dog, used to being a part of the family/pack and getting a lot of attention, is now abandoned, ignored and in what to the dog is the equivalent of solitary confinement. The dog barks and its owners instantly materializes to yell at the dog to stop barking! This is a recipe for disaster.

4. Some breeds are genetically programmed to bark more than others, like Shelties or Great Pyrenees. Although it is more difficult to resolve a barking problem with a breed that is more prone to barking than other breeds, it is not totally impossible.

It should now be obvious that most problem barking can be resolved by addressing the underlying causes of the barking. However, this is not always the case. Some dogs become so set in their barking behavior that simply addressing the underlying cause is not enough. In those cases, owners may want to consider additional measures to correct unwanted barking.

For especially difficult cases, owners may have to resort to other means to stop the barking. One choice is an “anti-bark collar.” There are basically two types of effective anti-bark collars. One is the citronella collar and the other is the electronic bark collar. These collars work either by releasing a spray containing citronella, a smell dogs usually dislike, or by administering an electronic shock to the dog when it barks. Both are activated by the dog’s barking. The electronic collar’s stimulation serves as a correction to the dog but is not be harmful to it. Some owners may find the use of electronic collars objectionable, believing them to be too harsh, but the correction is mild. Both collars work well if used properly.

If you choose to use either collar, give the dog a few days to get used to wearing the new collar before you activate it. In addition, you may want to turn the collar off and let the dog wear it for a few days at the end of the training period. It takes dogs anywhere from 10 and 14 days to learn a new behavior. It takes longer, and sometimes much longer, to break a behavior that is already established. Some dogs will learn that it is only when the collar is on that they get a correction, these dogs will bark again when the collar is removed.

WARNING: There is a real and ongoing debate as to whether electronic collars and debarking are “humane” or should be used. Used correctly in especially problematic situations, either can literally mean the difference between whether or not an owner keeps, or in some cases is able to keep, a dog.

Should you chose the electronic collar, be advised that the stimulation can trigger defensive aggression in the dog toward humans and/or other animals. You should exercise caution and limit the dog’s accessibility to both humans and other animals while the collar is activated. Also, the collar was not designed to be worn continually for the amount of time required to “correct” this behavior, so you should work with a behaviorist who can help you design an effective program that suits your and your dog's needs.

Another alternative is to have the dog “debarked.” This is a medical procedure performed by a licensed, practicing veterinarian with experience performing the surgery. Aftercare is critically important with this option, however, as scar tissue can develop if the dog is allowed to bark during the recovery period. This scar tissue can render the procedure ineffective and leave the dog as capable of barking as it was prior to the surgery. This procedure should only be undertaken as a last measure if all other means have proven ineffective. The dog will continue to bark just like it did before the surgery but the noise level will be greatly reduced.