

ORCHARD HILLS VETERINARY HOSPITAL

Barking Dogs

Barking is reported to be the most common animal problem reported to local councils, especially in suburbia. It leads to problems between neighbours and within the family as well as being a worry for the local Council. Barking is a normal behaviour of dogs. Nevertheless, when it is carried out to excess, at inappropriate places or at inappropriate times it becomes socially unacceptable and hence, becomes a behaviour problem. Barking may also be an abnormal behaviour.

Why do dogs bark?

There are many reasons for barking. The most obvious is that it is the dog's way of communicating. There are many recognised sounds that dogs make ranging from howling and whining to whimpering and barking. All dog owners can recognise the dog's different barks for different occasions.

As with many normal behaviours it cannot be completely eliminated, but once the cause is known, it can be modified. Dogs can be taught when it is appropriate to bark, and for how long, but it is probably impossible to stop completely, unless the dog is euthanased.

Before treating any behaviour problem it is essential to determine the cause. Barking is not a diagnosis in itself; it is a sign or symptom of the problem. Hence, in order to resolve the problem the cause needs to be determined.

Behaviour is determined by three main factors:

1. Genetics, or what is inherited.
2. Early or Previous Experience i.e. what is learnt
3. Current Environment, or situation that is prevailing at the time.

The genetic component is generally unalterable. However, by attempting to alter the dog's environment and its responses to earlier experiences some behaviours can be successfully modified.

As with any behaviour problem the predisposing factors need to be identified and then addressed. In order to resolve the problem a thorough behavioural history, as well as a clinical examination is necessary. The owner also needs to have realistic expectations of what behaviour modification and treatment can achieve. In some cases the barking is not able to be satisfactorily resolved.

Predisposing Factors:

1. Genetics

i) Breed

Some dogs are highly motivated to bark and have even been bred for this trait, over thousands of years. For example, the basenji is generally considered to be a relatively quiet dog, while Beagles and Terriers are more vocal.

ii) Protection of territory

Many dogs are obtained for the sole purpose of protection of property and most owners in fact want their dog to bark to warn off intruders. However, some dogs need less "perceived threat" to initiate vocalisation. Selective breeding of dogs for this trait, has led to territorial barking, Rottweilers and Shepherds are particularly prone to "watchdog barking"

2. Early or Previous Experiences

i) Separation anxiety

Dogs that are overly attached to their owners are very likely to vocalise when left alone or when they do not have access to their owner. They may also become destructive and soil indoors because of their anxiety. These dogs often have a history of being rescued or have had disruptions or changes in routine. Often owners are unaware of the problem until complaints are filed or a threatening letter appears as the behaviour is only manifest when the owner is not present.

ii) Learning

Some dogs have learnt that the one very effective way of getting attention is to vocalise. Even if the attention is negative it is better than no attention.

Dogs can also be intermittently rewarded for barking. For example, when the dog barks it is allowed inside the house. This may be to prevent neighbours complaining or because the owner can no longer tolerate the noise. This effectively rewards the dog and it has now learnt that barking brings attention as well as the pleasure of being allowed inside. It is now even more likely to repeat the behaviour and to be even more persistent in the barking.

iii) Fear

When animals are faced with a fear provoking stimulus, the physiological response may be one of flight, fright or freeze. Thus, dogs are known to bark at things that frighten them or they are unsure of. This may include people, other dogs as well as inanimate objects, such as plastic bags, garbage bins and planes. The barking is to deter being approached and to increase their personal space. By studying a dog's body language it is possible to determine its emotional state.

Inadequate socialisation can also be a factor in this fear response. If a dog has never been exposed to many people or other dogs of different breeds, it may exhibit fearful response, such as barking.

3. Current Environment

i) Boredom

Although most backyards are adequate for the needs of the human occupants there is often minimal stimulation for the dog. Within a few days the average dog has learnt where every blade of grass exists in the home environment. Thus, if the dog is not provided with adequate mental as well as physical stimulation the dog may find its own entertainment. This may be manifest by a highly aroused or over stimulated dog that will bark at anything and everything, including falling leaves and shadows as well as possums or cats moving within the dog's environment.

ii) Excitement

The owner coming home after a day at work or visitors arriving will often be greeted with excited barking. This behaviour will also be influenced by factors such as the breed of the dog and problems such as separation anxiety.

iii) Pain or Distress

If the dog is in pain or any physical discomfort, it is more likely to vocalise. Additionally, older dogs may have disturbed sleep, wake cycles and senility problems (canine cognitive dysfunction).

Treatment Options

If you own a problem-barking dog please visit the Hospital for advice on treatment options, which may include specific training, behavioural drugs, barking collars etc., or any combination of these. It is important to obtain progressive advice on these options to achieve any degree of success.

1. Genetic

i) Breed

Counselling owners about the most suitable breed for their particular circumstances BEFORE they actually acquire a dog would be the ideal situation. This is a service that we offer to our clients. Services such as "Select A – Pet" are also available to help potential owners with advice on choosing a pet based on the temperament of various breeds, owner lifestyle, owner expectations and personal preferences.

ii) Protection of Territory

Although the genetic component cannot be altered many things can be done to decrease the dog's territorial response. In many cases obedience training can help to

modify some territorial behaviour. Using techniques of desensitisation and counter conditioning the dog can be taught to be less reactive to the stimuli that now elicit territorial behaviour.

Denning some dogs or keeping the dog confined or inside, can also help as the triggers to barking are less likely to occur. One study showed that decreasing the amount of protein in the diet appeared to decrease territorial aggression and this may be of use in minimising this behaviour.

2. Previous Experiences

i) Separation Anxiety

This is a serious, and often under estimated, cause of barking. Treatment is multi faceted and may involve changing the cues that now trigger anxiety, graduated departure techniques, desensitisation and counter conditioning and teaching relaxation exercises and cues to the dog. Some anxiolytic medications in combination with behaviour modification have been shown to increase successful response times 2/3 fold. This means that, on average, dogs get better 2/3 times faster when placed on drugs than with behaviour modification alone. However, it still takes time, effort and commitment on the owner's part for a successful resolution. Generally, the presence of another dog does nothelp minimise this anxiety as it appears that these dogs need human company, not the company of another dog or cat to reduce their anxiety.

ii) Learning

Dogs often learn to bark in response to certain cues. For example, a dog that rushes out to bark at the postman every day may have learnt to identify the sound of the postman's motorbike. Each day the postman arrives and leaves after delivering the letters, with the dog barking at his departure. The dog, however, perceives that it is his action of barking that actually caused the postman to leave. He does not perceive that the postman was always going to leave and move on up the street. Thus, from the dog's perspective it appears that its barking brought about the outcome.

In this case the dog is trained to be relaxed and quiet as the postman proceeds up the street by using behaviour modification techniques. Initially, the dog may be taught to sit quietly at the other end of the house as the postman approaches. Each day, provided the dog is quiet and sitting, the dog is brought closer and closer to the postman. The dog is rewarded for being relaxed and quiet instead of barking. Thus, the cues that previously led to barking can be modified and an alternative response, sitting quietly, adopted in the same circumstances.

iii) Fear

Fear is self-reinforcing and it builds upon itself. The first step in treating fearful dogs is to reduce the dog's exposure to situations that stimulate this response. Then, desensitisation and counter conditioning techniques can be used to modify fearful barking. In some cases, anxiolytics may also be needed to further reduce the fear

and anxiety. The owner also needs to be aware of not accidentally reinforcing the fearful or anxious behaviour.

3. Environment

i) Boredom

As dogs are pack animals they are not happy to be alone for long periods. They need mental as well as physical stimulation to provide for their needs. Many options are available to provide an enriched environment. Exercise and obedience training are important components. Off lead exercise, if the dog is trustworthy and comes when called, is ideal. However, if the dog will not come when called then allowing the dog to walk on a long lead will also provide mental stimulation in the park. Obedience training and agility training are other useful methods of providing mental stimulation. Thirty minutes per day is recommended for most dogs, but this will vary according to breed, age and health.

Why not make use of our Leash-Free Enclosure!

There are now numerous toys, such as "Tuffy Toys" or Kongs, Buster Cubes, Treat balls and Boomer balls available. They are useful "occupational therapy" for dogs as no human involvement is necessary. Chasing gummadiscs and playing interactive games, (chasings, hide and seek), are also helpful in alleviating boredom and decreasing barking.

It helps to have a set time each day that play occurs so that a routine is established.

ii) Excitement

Obedience exercises can be useful in controlling this behaviour. The dog can be taught to sit and perform a trick, such as roll over or give me five, when the owner arrives home. However, this gleeful barking is often only short in duration and usually socially acceptable and no treatment is necessary.

iii) Pain or Distress

If any animal is in pain it should receive immediate veterinary treatment. Older dogs may also be suffering from canine cognitive dysfunction. This is reported to be similar to Alzheimer's disease in people and medication and prescription diets are available to help treat the problem.

Other Important Considerations

Owners need to be aware of the basics of learning theory as these principles are employed when dealing with any unacceptable behaviour. These basics are dealt with in more depth in obedience classes.

1. Reward

One of the most effective ways of reducing or modifying barking is to ignore the dog when he is vocalising. The dog should only be noticed (rewarded) when it is quiet, not when it is barking. However, most owners only notice the dog when it is vocalising and the dog learns that barking brings attention.

Placing the dog in an enforced sit or down stay and then rewarding, can be useful for short term control such as when visitors arrive. However, the dog needs to be taught these procedures when there are no distractions, as it is impossible for the dog to obey or learn new behaviours when it is very excited or aroused. Owners need to practice these commands with slightly more distractions as the dog improves.

2. Punishment

If punishment is to be effective it has to be administered immediately, (preferably within 1/2 second) of the misbehaviour occurring. It also needs to be administered consistently (every time) the unacceptable behaviour occurs. In practice, punishment is the least effective way of modifying any behaviour. It is virtually impossible to reprimand the dog immediately and consistently. Thus, the dog is intermittently rewarded and the behaviour becomes more persistent.

Although, in some situations the owner disciplining the dog may be effective, when the owner is not present the dog will receive no reprimand and so the behaviour will continue. Additionally this may lead the behaviour now only occurring in the owner's absence as the dog has now learnt not to bark when the owner is present. Again, this makes the behaviour more difficult to modify as the dog is now receiving intermittent rewards (attention).

3. Sin Bin

Some dogs may find exclusion from the family a sufficient deterrent to barking. The sin bin needs to be somewhere the dog never goes, except when it misbehaves. Thus, sending the dog to its bed or putting it outside is unlikely to be effective in controlling this behaviour. Putting the dog in a toilet or bathroom is more effective. There should be no food, toys or bedding in the sin bin. The dog should spend no longer than 5 minutes in the sin bin.

4. Collars

Unless an accurate diagnosis of the cause of the behaviour is made the use of collars in treatment will not be successful and may be detrimental to the dog.

* **Aboistop Collar:** This collar has a microphone that detects the dog's vocalisation. When the dog barks it squirts citronella in front of the dog's nose. The collar is designed to teach the dog that when it is wearing the collar it should not bark. However, when the collar is removed the dog can bark. It is not designed to permanently eliminate or reduce barking. The collar appears to work well in 80% of cases with no apparent ill effects on the dogs. It should probably not be used in cases of separation anxiety as punishing anxiety may make it worse. Additionally, the dog's motivation to bark in these cases is probably enough to override the deterrent effects of the citronella. Some dogs also appear to be able to detect when the citronella reservoir is empty, when the battery is flat and how to vocalise so that the citronella is not discharged.

* **Silencer Collar:** This collar emits an ultrasonic sound that acts as a reprimand for barking. It appears to have been generally unreliable in deterring barking.

* **Shock Collars:** When the dog barks an electronic stimulus or shock is delivered to the dog. In one study conducted at Cornell University, USA, this collar appeared to be less effective than the Aboistop collar. In some dogs it has been reported to elicit an aggressive response and should be used with great caution. Using the collar in cases of anxiety is unlikely to be successful. Owner activated collars should not be used as timing is critical for success. This collar is illegal in NSW.

5. Medication

Depending on the cause of the barking, short term tranquillisers may be useful. However this is not a desirable, nor long term, solution. ACP can also make dogs more reactive and noise sensitive so caution needs to be exercised with their use. If anxiety is the cause then using anti-anxiety has proved useful in combination with behaviour modification.

6. Debarking

Debarking is illegal and not performed at this hospital.