

## Anything for a Quiet Life: Problem solving the noisy canine neighbourhood

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### Abstract

"Shut Up!" Does it work? In most cases, no! There are more effective solutions, best determined after understanding the reason that the dog is barking.

Anti-barking collars may silence some dogs (not all) but do not remove the cause of the excessive barking. Chances are the barking behaviour will be replaced by some other annoying canine trait.

Providing stimulation where the dog is bored, calming techniques where the dog is agitated or stressed and blocking views and/or noises can be effective in problem solving the noisy canine neighbourhood. Understanding dog (and human) behaviour is the key to creating a peaceful community.

### Shut Up!

This is what most owners do when their dog barks? Yell at them to "Shut Up". Does it work? Yes and no. There are occasions that a short, sharp word with your dog can keep him quiet.

Dogs look to their leader for guidance and in barking they signal to their leader to investigate and take charge. Yelling at our dogs is one way to take charge, perhaps not the most effective one though.

### Cause and Treatment

As the previous paper explained, investigating the cause of the dog's barking behaviour is the first and most effective step in curing a noisy neighbourhood problem.

Once there is an understanding of the reasons that the dog is barking, then effective strategies can be put into place, which will help reduce the noise pollution. Some of the more common causes and their possible solutions, summarized in Table 1, include:

#### A. Lack of stimulation

The dog is bored and is making up his own stimulation by barking at noises and other distractions around him. Owners often mistakenly think that because they walked their dog already that day, there is no need for further stimulation. Or even more typically, owners state they have a big backyard - the dog couldn't possibly be bored!

Extra walks and a variety of walking environments can help stimulate the dog – body and mind. When walking, the dog is using his vision, his scent and his hearing to keep his brain alert. Chances are he has no need to bark when out walking and receiving enough of this type of stimulation might keep him happy when home.

Obedience training will keep a dog's mind active as the dog has to anticipate her owner's moves and what is required of her. Using treats, toys or praise as rewards can keep a dog wanting to please her owners. Even when an owner is not keen on formal training classes, there are informal styles of training where dogs and owners play games and learn basic manners – not jumping up, getting into cars etc. Training can be as simple as owners wish, only a few minutes a day or from the comfort of their armchair. Another bonus of training is that owners find their dogs are more responsive to them, always wanting to please. In other words, the dog stops barking when requested.

Dogs love to play games, even simple ones like hunting food, a primitive and enriching experience for a dog. Hiding treats and biscuits in the garden or around the house can

keep a dog occupied for hours. If owners are worried about their dog putting on weight, they can take a portion out of the dog's daily diet. If dogs aren't keen on dry biscuits, then their interest can be maintained by using liver treats or cat biscuits.

Playing with toys appeals to many dogs. Some love balls, some frisbees, others chew toys. Toys should be rotated and not left 24/7 with the dog as dogs can get bored with toys easily. Toys that also double up as treat givers, such as the rubber Kong or the Treat Ball are particularly effective at keeping dogs occupied.

Playing with other dogs can be great entertainment and burns off extra energy but dogs must be well socialised. Owners will often acquire another dog to help solve a problem. Not recommended! Usually you end up with double the trouble! If owners want to go down this route then it is often wise to suggest they "experiment" before they commit. Borrow a friend's dog and see if this helps reduce the barking. "Backyard Buddies" is a new concept, still under development, where dogs are introduced to compatible dogs to help solve boredom problems.

Dealing with boredom issues should not be difficult but it can take time to find an effective solution for some canines and one which owners are willing to implement.

#### B. Separation anxiety

Barking is a commonly exhibited symptom of the condition separation anxiety where dogs have become extremely bonded to their owner and fret when left alone. Other symptoms include whining, howling, inappropriate toileting, destructiveness or escaping.

Generally, anxiety at the owner's departure will begin immediately after the owner has left, if not prior to this. Many people inadvertently give signals that they are about to depart – picking up keys, etc. Changing routines and less emphasis on departure and arrival greetings may help calm the dog and reduce anxiety.

Leaving the dog with a job to do can occupy the dog long enough to get over the anxious period. A favourite toy, that only appears when the owner leaves, or food-releasing toys such as Kongs and Treat balls can occupy dogs for hours. It is only human imagination that limits the activities that dogs can perform in our absence.

Some dogs are comforted by the scent of their owner, others by snoozing the day away in a safe, secure spot and others by having the presence of a human voice in the background so leaving a radio switched on and an old "smelly" jumper in an enclosed den or kennel can help alleviate anxiety.

Medication is worth considering. Anxiety conditions respond well to a combination of medication and behavioural therapies. At the very least, calming medications can make beginning a behavioural treatment program an easier task.

More about anxiety in a later paper.

#### C. Disturbances

It is very difficult to control all disturbances in the dog's environment. Dogs who bark at birds flying into the garden, for instance, can generally only be stopped by relocating them to a different area or exposing them to great numbers of birds who do not react to the noise of the dog – difficult to achieve. Attention to other forms of stimulation for the dog can help as can distractions at the times that the

disturbance is likely to happen. If the dog is tired enough after walks and games then he is less likely to bark at disturbances. If he barks at infrequent intrusions eg. doorbell ringing, then some individuals can be treated by repeated exposure to the stimulus. Alternatively the dog can be taught another rewarding behaviour such as "Sit" when the distraction appears, although this is difficult for many owners to implement as they are often absent when the barking behaviour occurs.

If a dog barks each time another dog walks past the garden, blocking the view can help. If the barking is in response to a person entering the yard, then the presence of the owner should be sufficient to make him cease. In the owner's absence, again the dog can be relocated or taught that there is no need to bark by introducing him to a variety of people entering the yard.

As with most behaviour problems, the individual situation has to be taken into account and a solution designed that is suitable for the dog and the owner.

#### D. Discomfort

If a dog is in genuine discomfort then the obvious first step is a visit to the vet. Many dogs who are restrained in the backyard or in a vehicle bark. Restraining a dog is rarely an answer to barking problems and more appropriate forms of containment have to be provided.

If a dog is in pain or suffering another illness or ailment, then it may bark in distress. Again the dog must be taken to the veterinary surgeon. Often changes in behaviour are the first symptoms of illness.

#### E. Excitement

Many dogs bark when they play, meet other dogs or their owners return home due to the excitement generated. Fortunately excitement is usually short lived and the barking ceases when the dog calms down. Dogs can be trained to show their enthusiasm in less noisy ways. If the dog is excited by events happening in his neighbourhood then blocking views and relocating the dog can be effective in reducing the barking.

**Table 1: Suggested actions to solve barking problems**

Possible Solutions	Cause of Barking Problem				
	Boredom	Separation Anxiety	Disturbances	Discomfort	Excitement
Exercise	✓	✓	✓		✓
Training	✓		✓		✓
Play toys/dogs	✓	✓	✓		
Hunting food	✓	✓	✓		✓
Change of routine	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Veterinary Care		✓✓		✓	

#### No Cause

Sometimes it is difficult to find a cause of canine barking behaviour. Often the behaviour has become a habit with no clear identifying reasons. This may make it more difficult to treat the problem. It is not impossible, however, and changes can still be implemented. Consider which would be

most appropriate from the table suggestions. The dog will often respond to these changes by being quieter.

For instance, barking may be stopped by simply giving the dog more exercise or changing his routine, even without knowing why he is barking. One method that can be applied, even without knowing why the dog is barking is to teach the dog to be quiet. Dr Paul McGreevy's 8 Point Plan for training dogs to stop barking can be used to help owner's deal with their barking dogs. This step-by-step training plan involves owners actually teaching their dog to bark first, before teaching them to be quiet.

Although this may appear to be doing the opposite of what we wish – the dog becoming noisier, this is often what will happen in changing behaviour. Before the unwanted behaviour is reduced, the dog will often attempt to increase the frequency or intensity of the unwanted behaviour. This is because the animal is expecting a reward for the barking. He has to learn that the behaviour is no longer being rewarded before it ceases.

#### Overall Plan of Action

It often helps to design an overall plan of action, depending on the individual case, one that will be effective for the dog, the owners, and the neighbourhood. This will also depend on the individual council's policy and procedure. A suggestion might be:

**Step 1:** Gather more information about the behaviour, the dog and the owner, their awareness of the problem and their willingness to work on it.

**Step 2:** Together with the owner, deduce, if possible, the cause of the barking behaviour and any possible solutions.

**Step 3:** Put solutions into place and monitor progress.

**Step 4:** Keep monitoring progress or setbacks in problem solving.

#### When Noise Continues

When barking is still a problem, the problem can be revisited and further solutions tried.

Many councils at this point, if not before, will suggest anti-barking collars. These may work in some cases and are useful as a suggestion of a quick fix. Anti-barking devices, however, do not get to the route of the problem, the actual cause. They are often expensive and may not work at all or only in the short term or, in other cases, the long term. When they do stop the barking, they have often not actually solved the problem eg. boredom and the owner (and perhaps council) must contend with other manifestations of the problem eg. dog now escapes.

Beware of using these devices when the dog is suffering from any kind of anxiety problem, as the result will be a more anxious dog, or when the dog is aggressive, as it may associate the stimulus of the aggression with the collar's action.

Where an owner is not willing to work with their dog's problem, there is little that can be done to cure the problem. Fining the owner may work but where there is little bond between owner and their pet, chances are their dog will be relinquished to a shelter or pound.

When the problem is or becomes too difficult to solve easily, this is the time that professional help is needed as considerable time can then be invested to work with the dog and owner. Understanding a barking problem is a case of understanding both dog behaviour and human behaviour!