

What a debarkle! Barking Problem or Problem Barker- Can you tell the difference?

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Abstract

Dogs vocalise by barking for many reasons. Barking is a form of communication as much as language is for human communication. Unfortunately most humans are not fluent in canine vocal communication any more than they are in canine visual communication. This leads to misinterpretation of what is actually being communicated and as a result many dogs suffer. Not only is the underlying problem not resolved but in many cases inappropriate, unacceptable or inhumane "treatments" are enforced on the dogs that will actually exacerbate the problem. This is usually due to the fact that inappropriate advice has been given by misinformed people, albeit with the best intentions.

Introduction

Vocalisation that is of concern to the community is usually unacceptable either in frequency, intensity and/or duration. These concerns may vary whether it is the owner, the neighbour(s) or the Council that is affected.

If the vocalisation is of concern to owners or the community advice may be sought and then may be offered. Often the advice is well meaning, but unfortunately it may be given by ill informed and untrained people who may not recognise that *behaviour problems* vary from *problem behaviours*.

What is rarely considered when dealing with barking problems is that the dog also has concerns and if these issues are not addressed this is a serious animal welfare issue.

Many of the treatment or management options for barking dogs involve attempts to stop the dog barking. Although attempting to stop barking is an admirable goal, it is not realistic or humane. This is a serious animal welfare issue.

Although a barking dog, regardless of the predisposing cause, has a *problem behaviour*, many dogs that bark have *behaviour problems*. This means that the problems cannot be addressed in the same way. This is regardless of whether the underlying cause is normal or abnormal behaviour.

Predisposing Factors

Dogs vocalise. This is a fact. It is normal for dogs to vocalise to communicate. In most cases there are appropriate (and even acceptable) reasons for dogs barking. However, there are many dogs that have true behaviour problems as the underlying cause for barking and these are not always recognised.

Many factors have been purported to predispose the dog to vocalise. These may be genetic, learnt or environmental or a combination of them. These reasons may include barking in excitement, in greeting, as a warning, when under-stimulated (mentally as well as physically), when fearful, in pain or anxious and when seeking attention. Some dogs are highly motivated to bark and have even been bred for this trait, over thousands of years.

Once the underlying triggers for barking have been identified, then treatment or management options are usually suggested. The same management suggestions cannot be used for all barking problems.

If the dog ceases to bark the problem resolves to the satisfaction of the owner and the larger community. However, the problem may not have been resolved to the satisfaction of the dog as the underlying factors may not

have been addressed.

Behaviour Problems

It is estimated that over 30 % of dogs have anxiety related problems. These may include fears, phobias, aggression, noise reactivity and separation anxiety.

Dogs that have separation anxiety are defined as being overly attached to their owners (or people). These dogs are more likely to vocalise when left alone or when they do not have access to their owner (or people). They may also become destructive and eliminate indoors because of their anxiety. Generally, the presence of another dog does not help minimise this anxiety.

When animals are faced with a fear-provoking stimulus, the physiological response may be one of flight, fright or freeze. Dogs are known to bark at things that frighten them or when they are unsure of stimuli including people, other dogs as well as inanimate objects, such as plastic bags, garbage bins and planes. Inadequate socialisation can also be a factor in this fear response.

Additionally, older dogs may have disturbed sleep, -wake cycles and senility problems (canine cognitive dysfunction). Cases of cognitive dysfunction may also present with increased vocalisation especially at night.

Incorrect Management Options

When dogs misbehave the most common response is to punish the dog for the behaviour. People rarely question or hesitate to use punishment when attempting to modify behaviour but often question the role of rewards. Although many people believe that punishment is effective in modifying behaviour it is in fact, not an effective way of changing behaviour.

When owners are asked during a behavioural consultation what they have done previously to try to resolve the problem, inevitably at least 90% of owners will list different forms of punishment. These include yelling, shouting, smacking, hitting, kicking, throwing chains, using anti bark collars etc at various times. Interestingly many owners do not perceive these as being punishers.

This is not surprising as in many training situations handlers are taught to yank on a choke chain to get the dog to comply with a command such as sit or walk to heel. Commonly this is done before even teaching the dog what the command actually means and what is expected of the dog. When asked how effective these methods have been most owners say that either they worked initially and now the dog ignores them, or they had little effect as the dog still performs the unacceptable behaviour. This may lead to more frustration on the part of the owner and hence more punishment for the animal.

This clearly demonstrates the lack of understanding that many people have of *learning theory*. The problem with using punishment is that it does not teach what behaviour is actually expected in the circumstances. As such it does not necessarily lead to the animal performing an acceptable alternative response. Additionally the effects of punishment are not as predictable as that the effects of reward. In already anxious animals punishment may also impede learning as it may increase anxiety.

Punishment may also lead to a break down of the bond between the pet and the owner. The pet begins to mistrust the owner and anticipate punishment. Punishment can also be misused as owners do not understand how it works, and then lead to abuse, whether intentional or not.

Repeated use of punishment decreases its effectiveness, especially when the consequences are not greatly detrimental from the animal's perspective. Often the reprimand is given at a low intensity and, over time the animal learns to tolerate it so does not respond to it. This then increases the frustration level of the owner who then increases the intensity, eg the owner now hits harder. This in turn increases the animal's tolerance. As this cycle is repeated the punishment may turn to abuse. Perception of pain also varies between individuals (dogs and owners).

In practice it is very difficult for most people to effectively administer punishment at an appropriate level at the correct time.

Appropriate Management Options

The first step in attempting to manage an unacceptable barking problem is to correctly identify the underlying causes or predisposing factors. Once the predisposing factors have been identified, appropriate methods can be recommended to limit the barking. For any permanent change to occur the new behaviour needs to consistently rewarded.

Separation anxiety is a serious, and often under estimated, cause of increased vocalisation. Treatment is multi faceted and may involve changing the cues that now trigger anxiety, graduated departure techniques, desensitisation and counter-conditioning and teaching relaxation cues to the dog. Anti-anxiety medications, in combination with behaviour modification, have been shown to increase successful response times 2-3 fold. However, it still takes time, effort and commitment on the owner's part for a successful resolution.

Fear is self-reinforcing. The dog learns to anticipate that the stimulus will be fear provoking and this is now reinforced when the stimulus is experienced again. 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 anxiolytic medication may also be needed to further reduce the fear and anxiety.

Many cases of **canine cognitive dysfunction** can be managed with medication and / or diet designed to increase anti-oxidants.

In none of these case is punishment a treatment option.

Summary

The key to managing barking is first to correctly recognise the predisposing factors. Unacceptable vocalisation (barking) that is a *problem behaviour* (ie normal in the context in which it occurs) will respond to addressing the underlying causes and rewarding appropriate behaviour.

Unacceptable vocalisation that is due to a behaviour problem (abnormal in the context in which it occurs) needs individual attention to address the underlying issues.

Punishing the behaviour in either case is never acceptable.

References and Further Reading:

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Kersti graduated in Veterinary Science from Sydney University and became very interested in animal behaviour while working overseas. To further her knowledge she went back to university graduating from Macquarie University with a BA in Behavioural Sciences with a major in psychology. In 1992 she began developing the program of Puppy Preschools[®] in veterinary hospitals around Australia. This interest led her to complete a MA (Hons) degree by thesis on the long and short term behavioural effects of puppy socialisation and training programs. She is a registered specialist in Animal Behaviour, a Fellow of the Australian College of Veterinary Scientists in Animal Behaviour and a Diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists. She is a member of the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behaviour, member of the Australasian Society for the Study of Animal Behaviour and the Delta Society. She has studied at Cornell University, USA, University of Pennsylvania, USA, Guelph University, Canada and Queensland University, Australia. In 1999 she spent 7 months on faculty at the University of Pennsylvania, based in the Department of Clinical Studies, Animal Behavior Clinic. Kersti runs Sydney Animal behaviour Service in conjunction with 3 other veterinary behaviourists and deals exclusively with animal behaviour problems. She is actively involved in developing and operating Puppy Preschool[®] and Kitten Kindy[®]. Currently, she serves as a member of the ASAVA committee as well as serving on several other committees. Kersti teaches undergraduates at Sydney University as well as Post Graduate Courses in Animal Behaviour in Australia and USA. She has presented at conferences and meetings in Australia, NZ, UK, Japan, Europe and USA. She has published numerous papers on animal behaviour in scientific journals, magazines and periodicals and is a regular contributor to print and electronic media. Currently she is a regular presenter on ABC radio on pet care and behaviour.