

Barking Up the Wrong Tree: The Importance of understanding and correct diagnosis of barking in dogs

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Abstract

Dogs bark to communicate, to their immediate pack and to the wider community. Barking is a behaviour that humans have encouraged, both deliberately in canine breeding and inadvertently in our response to their barking behaviour. Barking, a commonly reported problem, usually only becomes a concern when it is performed to excess. The level of barking considered excessive varies between people and neighbourhoods.

Reasons that dogs bark vary and may include boredom, excitement, anxiety, territoriality and discomfort, making barking a difficult behaviour to diagnose and even more challenging to change. Strategies for diagnosing barking problems include investigating timing, location, presence of influencing external factors and understanding canine behaviour.

Reason to bark

Dogs bark for many reasons but the overall function of barking is to communicate to the canine pack and to the wider community. Understanding specific cases and why individual dogs bark to excess is often a difficult process but a correct diagnosis is an important part of the behaviour problem solving process.

Ancestors of our domestic dogs did not bark. When dogs came to live alongside humans, however, those dogs who alerted us to the presence of strangers, perhaps enemies or predators, were valued. Thus we encouraged our domestic dogs to bark through selective breeding. Barking remains a useful warning tool, signalling a potential danger or disturbance nearby.

Inadvertently, the owner's response to their dog's barking may also reinforce this behaviour. The dog barks and we shout at the dog, joining in with the noise, therefore reinforcing to the dog that this is what we expect!

In most cases barking is not a problem behaviour. It is only when it is performed excessively that owners seek help or neighbours demand some action, either to the owners or by reporting their annoyance to their local council.

Feel the Noise

At the risk of being anthropomorphic (putting human thoughts and traits onto animal behaviour), it helps to put ourselves in our dog's paws. Why does our dog bark?

As stated previously, dogs bark to communicate with their pack. And generally this strategy works well. Something happens in the dog's environment and it starts barking. Barking then continues until the situation changes – the stimulus is removed or another quietening stimulus replaces the noise-provoking one.

When barking, the dog is in a state of emotional arousal – excited, aggressive, fearful and/or stressed. Most owners understand that an unknown person entering their premises can cause their dog to experience any one of those emotions and start barking. But remember that boredom can also be a stressor. Dogs with nothing to do will often make up their own stimulation by digging, chewing, trying to escape or barking.

The barking may cause us to come running, which is exactly what the behaviour is aiming to do; get help from the pack or at least notify the leader to take some action. When we are not available to attend to the dog's needs, the barking continues, the dog may continue to be agitated and a long term problem is established.

Often barking dogs are misdiagnosed. The actual cause of their barking is not sought or the wrong cause is assumed.

The dangers of misdiagnosis: Case Study - Jake

Jake was a 2 year old Border Collie cross, living in the suburbs with a family. The father worked long hours, the mother walked, fed and played with the dog and generally was around the home for most of the day except when she had to take the children to their various activities. Jake was reported to his local council for excessive barking and the family were notified.

Jake's mother, Wendy, had no idea that Jake had been barking because he rarely barked when she was present. Wendy was made to feel guilty by council and neighbours because she had a working dog while living in the suburbs. She was told to give the dog more attention to stop it barking.

Wendy did as she was advised and increased the amount of time she was spending with Jake. She played more intensively with him and took him out with her in the car whenever possible. Sometimes, however, she still had to leave him at home.

The result was not what everyone expected. Jake increased the amount of barking when left alone. A couple of times he actually managed to scale the fence and paced the street outside, still barking!

The problem with Jake is that he had been treated for boredom and this was not the cause of his barking. Jake barked because he suffered anxiety when his owner left him alone. His problem, perhaps understandably, was treated as similar to many other working dogs living in unstimulating environments without examining his individual situation.

Canine investigation

Understanding barking behaviour can take a bit of detective work. First of all to determine if there actually is a problem and subsequently to determine the cause. Here are some possible steps to diagnosing a barking problem.

1. Who is affected?

How much barking is excessive? Is there a definitive measure? Some councils have attempted to put a timeframe on barking but the problem varies depending on the situation- rural/ suburban/ inner city and who is affected by the noise. Are the surrounding neighbours affected or is it just one household or one particular person? If people are removed from the equation when determining excessive noise, excessive barking may be determined by the dog's response. If the dog is clearly stressed then the barking behaviour needs treatment.

2. Owner awareness

Is the owner aware of their dog's barking habits? Many owners are not. Especially if the barking occurs only when they are away from their premises. Once the owner knows, then they may be able to shed light on the problem and this may all that is required to solve the problem.

3. Location

Where is the dog barking? Most dogs will bark at home but there are some who reserve their vocalisations for the park – not so lucky for those people who border the parks. Some dogs bark when they are indoors. This may be a problem for their owners but it is rarely a problem for neighbours. Those dogs who bark outdoors form the major body of council complaints. Do they bark indiscriminately, only when their owner leaves or goes to bed or when something passes by their front fence.

4. Measurement

Measuring the barking can help determine its extent and its cause. Keeping diaries can be useful as it helps measure the frequency and lengths of the barking periods. Does the dog bark for 6 hours continuously or does it bark for 30 minutes but only last thing at night? Does the dog bark immediately after the owner has left the premises or after 5 hours of being alone. Measuring barking can be done by pen and paper, by video-tape or by observation at different times of the day.

5. Cause

Can the stimulus of barking be determined? Are there other dogs or people passing by? If so, is the barking a warning of a potentially more dangerous situation should the dog ever escape? Are there possums intruding into the yard at night causing the dog to bark? Perhaps leaves falling from trees are enough to stimulate a barking episode!

Common causes

Common causes of barking include:

- A. Boredom cause by a lack of stimulation in the dog's life. The dog is bored and had little to occupy his mind and body so barks at every little thing happening within his environment. Typically the dog will bark after a length of time left alone.
- B. Anxiety at the owner leaving. Barking may be one of several symptoms if separation anxiety is the problem, including inappropriate toileting, digging, chewing or trying to escape. Typically the dog barks immediate upon the owner's departure.
- C. Disturbance in the dog's environment, often when people or other dogs pass by the fence/gate or when possums or other disturbances occur at night. This territorial behaviour is often welcomed by owners but not when barking is performed to excess.
- D. Pain or discomfort due to dog being left tied up or in a confined space.
- E. Excitement at stimulating occurrences in the dog's environment, people calling or balls being thrown.

There are lots of reason why a dog may be barking obsessively and it may not be one reason alone but a combination of factors. Once the situation is understood then effective strategies can be implemented to change the behaviour.

All Change

Changing any behaviour takes time and understanding of the cause. We can attempt to change a behaviour without understanding why it is happening but if we can identify the stimulus, a change may be easier to implement and to maintain.

Usually by the time a behaviour has become a problem it has become a habit, one that has been occurring for a substantial period of time. Changing behaviours like barking will rarely happen overnight. Often, however, canine behaviour problems are only treated by trying a find a solution – a quick fix. The real cause of the behaviour remains unknown. Understanding the cause of a problem can help find an effective solution.

If this seems difficult to understand, then try thinking of some equivalent situations in humans. Changing behaviours such as smoking, nail biting, a biscuit too many with your coffee can all take time and understanding to remove them from your life. Understand why you feel the urge to do your particular "habit"– the physical and/or emotional reasons – and you may be able to solve your problems. Removing the stimulus eg biscuits, can also help but unless you can guarantee to remove them forever, you may not have cured the problem.

Case unsolved

Some causes of barking are harder to diagnose than others. This is where professional help may be called. Rather than attempt to treat the unknown, seek help from others who deal with barking problems on a day to day basis. Dog, trainers, vets and behaviourists may all be able to help. If you are unsure of a particular person or organisation's policy or procedure, then check it out. Only send people where you would be comfortable sending your family or your dog. Learn about their diagnosis and you will understand more about dog behaviour in the future. Don't keep barking up the wrong tree!

Joanne Righetti

Joanne strives to educate, motivate & counsel the general public & professionals on animal behaviour and the human-animal relationship, on the problems and the joys. Joanne understands relationships (specialising in the human-animal kind) and has a Ph.D specialising in Animal Behaviour from the University of New South Wales and a Certificate in TV Presenting. She has her own business dealing with pet, owner & community relationships, education, research and treatment of behaviour problems. This includes acting as a consultant to the NSW Animal Welfare League, co-hosting Pets Music Talk radio show, working with local councils to train staff in animal behaviour and develop information services for the public and pet loss grief counselling to appropriate individuals and organisations.