

Barking As A Result Of Separation Anxiety



This is often a result of a dog that is too dependent on its human family, has spent a lot of time with the owner and then suddenly there is a change in circumstances, i.e. a change in the hours of work.

A tell tale sign that the behaviour is likely to be a result of attention seeking or separation anxiety is that the behaviour usually starts as soon as the owner leaves.

Something must be reinforcing the behaviour otherwise it would stop.

Signs of separation anxiety can include:

- Barking
- Destructive behaviour
- Vomiting
- Excessive licking
- Elimination
- Anorexia
- Excessive greeting behaviour
- Depression
- Constant pestering of the owner
- Diarrhoea

Although attention seeking and separation anxiety can be termed "naughty" behaviour it is not recommended that you use discipline to try and correct any problems associated with fears, phobias or anxiety.

Suggested treatment methods:

1. Try to make the dog less dependant on human company

This is best done by regular, short, non-stressful periods of separation, slowly increasing. Shut the dog in a room for short periods of time. Be inconsistent i.e. 30 seconds, 2 minutes, 5 minutes, 25 seconds, 10 minutes etc. Note, you must let the dog out before anxiety sets in, otherwise you are reinforcing the anxiety.

2. Avoid excitable departures and arrivals

Making a big deal over departures causes anxiety. Making a big greeting fuss over arrivals reinforces the anxiety. Keep departures and arrivals low key.

3. Eliminate "leaving" cues i.e. actions the dog associates with your departure

Do things that you usually only do when you are about to leave. Pick up the car keys, rattle them and then put them down. Put on your coat, then take it off. Open and shut the door. Each time praise the dog for not showing anxiety (the less anxiety the dog has before you leave, the easier your absence will be tolerated).

4. Introduce "comfort" cues i.e. things that will help the dog relax

Leave the radio or television set on, a loud ticking clock, or a large bone or chew toy. Present the "comfort" cue, leave, return before the dog becomes anxious, greet the dog in a low-key manner and remove the "comfort" cue.

5. Regular routine

A regular routine can create stability. If the dog knows how long you are going to be away then it knows how long it has to wait for your return.

6. Anti-anxiety drugs

These can be used as a last resort. Further training may be hindered while the dog is on medication. See your local veterinarian.

7. Anti-barking collar

Although this may eliminate the barking, it may not solve the problem. The best solution is prevention. The dog should be made to spend time alone as a puppy.

Barking Dogs

With the growing population and intensification of housing, we are creating an environment for less tolerance of noisy dogs. Dogs can bark as loud as 100 decibels. That is equivalent to the noise of a printing plant or a jackhammer at 15 metres (Harris Handbook of Noise Control.)

Why do dogs bark?

Barking is a perfectly natural characteristic of the canine species. Right from birth a puppy learns that whining and yelping is a care-seeking noise which attracts the attention of its mother. Over the years we have bred dogs for their ability to bark to ward off intruders or to round up stock, etc. However, the concern arises when the barking becomes excessive and is loud and persistent, creating a nuisance.

It could be:

- **Environmental**

Provide plenty of shade, shelter, food and fresh water. Regularly treat the dog and kennel area for irritating fleas and flies. Ensure that the kennel is a suitable size and kept in a clean condition.

If you suspect that children are teasing your dog you will need to take steps to stop this.

- **Territorial Defence**

Protecting the property from intruders.

- **Attention Seeking**

Dogs are social animals and prefer company.

- **A Learned Behaviour**

A dog may learn that barking causes the owner to make a fuss over it.

- **Excitement**

Vigorous play or the sight and sound of children playing nearby increases the dog's state of arousal.

- **Breed**

Some dogs are bred to bark.

- **Boredom**

An uninteresting environment with no company and a lack of exercise.

- **Self-Stimulation**

An obsessive-compulsive behaviour. This can be the result of excessive stress or boredom.

- **Separation Anxiety**

Some dogs are too dependent on their human owners.

- **Contact Seeking**

Communication with other dogs.

- **Fear or Physical Discomfort**

Always consider a vet check especially if the barking is out of character.

Barking is often the symptom of an underlying problem. The key to resolving the barking is to identify and treat the problem.

By determining the type of barking being expressed (barking, whining, howling, etc.) and by observing the dog's behaviour, you may be able to narrow down the underlying problem. Once you have established this you can then consider the best course of action to take.