

THE NOISY DOG: WHINING, BARKING AND HOWLING

Origins and Motivation of Vocalizations in Dogs

Whining, whimpering, growling, moaning, barking, howling, shrieking...dogs sure can make their presence known! Studies have suggested that some dog breeds do bark more than others. However, all dogs bark. Nordic breeds, such as Alaskan Malamute, tend to howl more than other breeds. Beagles, and several other hounds, produce a characteristic bay (a kind of bark/howl). Terriers typically vocalize in bursts of barking.

In general, dogs are a much noisier species than their famous and much maligned ancestor, the noble wolf. Wolves are indeed associated with howling, which functions to communicate with pack members at a distance, to maintain pack unity, and to advertise a territorial presence to neighboring packs. But other than howling, wolves are relatively quiet, compared to most dogs. The wolf does bark but it is heard infrequently. Other vocal sounds are used to signal at closer distances, such as the more intimate whimper or whine, or the warning growl. So why does the dog, known to descend from the wolf, bark so much more?

People wanted dogs to make noise. Our own ancestors recognized the wolf's potential as hunting partner, rather than just competitor for prey. Wolves were additionally useful because of their deep devotion to the pack and to the territory. These instincts were easily transferred onto their human families. The early domesticated dogs were the first home alarm system, the first domestic security force. When the men went off on to hunt, some of the dogs stayed behind as sentries to alert and protect the women and children. It would have been clearly advantageous for these early dogs to make noise. Barking was a trait that was selectively bred over successive generations to provide forewarning of intruders. And so it began, and so it is today.

Vocal sounds reflect a dog's emotional state. An excited dog may bark to announce the arrival of a pack member's return to the territory (i.e. your coming home from work). A whining dog may be a bit anxious, but a howling dog may be exceedingly upset. A dog vocalizes for many reasons. The growl can be a warning to an intruder who has dared to encroach onto the dog's territory. The growl can also warn you to stay away from your dog's favorite treat or toy, or not touch that sore paw. The bark is often a territorial alarm call, but dogs bark to get attention for any number of things in we reinforce the behavior.

Your reaction to your dog's barking or whining is important feedback. If your dog is rewarded for making a particular sound (whining=going out in the yard), she/he has received important feedback and reinforcement. Thereafter, chances improve that the whining, in this example, will be repeated the next time the dog wants to go out. However, the dog could also apply this lesson to other contexts to see how it will impact his or her world, including the people in it. And so, this dog could learn to whine for food

or a pat on the head. Vocalization in dogs can become an important attention-seeking behavior.

Barking is also used in aggressive sequences other than in territorial defense. For instance, dominant and assertive dogs will bark to correct or direct subordinates. Think of herding dogs who may bark at sheep to make them move in certain directions, or of more confident dogs who bark at others in the play ground to instruct more submissive dogs to come and play. In fact, think of your dog barking at you for anything she/he wants. Isn't this similar to your own child yelling at you or stomping his or her feet for something she wants? When you look at it this way, barking can typify the behavior of dominant dogs who want to control us.

Dogs may bark with a purpose, but sometimes dogs bark just because they can. Barking is associated with an increase in level of excitement, and in this context, it may be an anxiety-releasing mechanism. For some dogs, barking may become a pastime; they actually seem to enjoy it! For dogs who bark uncontrollably, we have our own ancestors and ourselves to thank.

Solutions

Now that you know why dogs bark, what should you do about your own noisy pet? Does your dog seem to over react to little things by barking incessantly? What should you do to prevent your dog from becoming a noisy nuisance? What should you do if she/he already is?

Does your dog explode in a frenzy of barking, running up and down between the door and the window so much that a deep groove has been worn in the floor? Try to be objective for a moment. If your dog's barking is triggered by passersby or by other minor disturbances, your dog's needs are probably not being satisfied. A dog who becomes 'hysterical' when a car drives is unlikely to have many other opportunities for normal physical or intellectual stimulation. More often than not, dogs who bark too much need more activity in the form of added opportunities for exercise, play and social interaction.

A long morning walk starts off your dog's day on the right foot. This is when most healthy dogs are raring to go. The dog is most active during daylight hours, as are we. Before you leave for work, or get involved with household chores, put a dent in your dogs arousal by proving him or her with some exercise and social interaction. The opportunity to play with other friendly dogs will also release much of your pet's energy in a very healthy way. The length of the walk should be appropriate to your dog's age, health, level of activity, and temperament. The idea is that if your dog is ready for a nap, she/he won't overact to the little things. The morning walk sets the tone for the rest of your dog's day.

Obedience practice every day gives your dog additional intellectual stimulation and, done right, can become a form of structured play. It also reminds your assertive dog that you are in control. A submissive dog is less likely to bark in any demanding fashion

at the leader of the pack. Teach your dog to “sit” or “down” to earn everything he/she wants, instead of rewarding the dog for barking at you. Play with your dog. Incorporate obedience commands (e.g. “sit” to earn that ball). Set an agility course in your yard or join a local dog agility club!

Unfortunately, it may be easier for some frustrated dog owners to purchase anti-bark collars than it is to give their dogs the exercise and attention they really crave and deserve. Nonetheless, some dogs persist in their nuisance barking despite ample exercise and attention. For these noisy pets, anti-bark collars may be helpful. My preference among these devices is the citronella bark collar. This anti-barking device releases a repugnant but harmless herbal aerosol whenever the dog barks. The scent is disagreeable to the dog but quite pleasant to people. Electronic bark collars should be considered only should other measures fail, and must be used under the direct supervision of a veterinary behaviorist or dog trainer who knows how they should be used.

The surgical procedure known as “debarking” is not recommended unless the dog’s vocal behavior is unresponsive to every other remedy. Faced with eviction, or the dog’s euthanasia, debarking may become a more realistic option for the tormented owner. The debarking surgery does not stop the dog’s bark. In this operation, the vocal cords are cut. However, scar tissue develops as part of the healing process and the dog may eventually be able to produce a raspy and less troublesome bark. Most veterinarians no longer advocate or perform this controversial surgery because of recent advances in veterinary behavior medicine. Behavior modification, combined with psychoactive medication if necessary, is usually effective in turning off the dog’s desire to vocalize.

ATTENTION-SEEKING VOCALIZATION

What role do pet owners play in dogs who bark or whine too much? Your dog can learn to bark or whine (and all kinds of other things) if his or her behavior is rewarded with your attention. Remember that your attention could be as simple as looking up when the dog barks, or saying “shut up”!. Even in the form of punishment, negative attention is still attention. Reward (positive reinforcement) may take many forms, including food, praise, or petting.

Barking is valuable for a good watchdog; however, it becomes a nuisance if allowed to escalate. Dogs can overreact to the least sound and learn to bark constantly for no reason. Sadly, some dogs are taken for granted unless they misbehave and are essentially ignored unless they make noise.

One of the most common scenarios that set any dog up to bark at little things is instigated by the owner. It is normal for dogs to give a small ‘woof!’ when startled by a noise. If you respond by saying “What was that?!” in an excited whisper, you are reinforcing your dog’s vocal behavior. Your dog will learn to bark, louder and longer, every time you encourage it. Your dog may then learn to bark in a variety of situations, many of them inappropriate, for a reward. For example, if your dog barks when it happens to be dinnertime, you might think he/she is hungry and feed your pet. The next

day, your dog will bark earlier and more persistently, until he/she is fed. It is an easy extension of this lesson to bark for a treat, or to be let outside, or to demand that you open the door to come back in.

It is not enough to just say “no” or “be quiet!” when your dog barks too much. Your attention, even it is to object, could still reinforce the behavior. Furthermore, your mild verbal punishment does not teach the dog what to do instead of barking (or whining...). Undesirable behavior must be corrected immediately by teaching the dog an acceptable alternative. In other words, if your dog is barking at the autumn leaves as they fall, say “no!” followed immediately with “come/sit/stay/Good Dog!”. Rather than giving food to a barking dog, for example, have the dog ‘sit/stay’ and feed the quiet and calm dog. Your dog will associate good behavior, not barking, with the reward.

In some situations, the best way to deal with barking or whining is to simply ignore it. If your dog is whining or barking for a treat, for example, simply walk away. Then call your puzzled but quiet dog to “come/sit” and reward this desirable behavior with a pat on the head, and then a treat.

BARKING DURING ISOLATION

Dogs who are either unaccustomed to being alone or overly dependant on a particular individual can have difficulty coping with separation from their preferred playmate or human companion. Separation-related anxiety can emerge in dogs at any age, and is often expressed by vocal behaviors such as whining, barking, and howling. In these cases, vocalization is not just an expression of extreme emotion, it is a distress call aimed at getting the attention of the attachment figure. Vocalizing is an emotional release. Remember, too, that one of the reasons that the ancestral wolf howled was to call to other pack members at a distance... The distress call in dogs is seen in the form of barking, whining, baying, and howling to this day. Other signs of Separation Anxiety Syndrome include destructiveness, inappropriate elimination, and excessive grooming. The dog may be particularly anxious in the initial moments of separation from the attachment figure. Many dogs are most affected in the first half four of separation, but some continue to exhibit symptoms like barking for the entire period of isolation. Behavior modification, sometimes combined with mood-stabilizing medication as necessary, is the best solution for dogs who are particularly affected.