

BOUND ANGELS

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Bark Busting

It seems that many people are unaware of the fact that dogs bark. It's the only logical answer I can find to people's surprise and their steadfast issue with trying to get dogs to stop barking. I think that people call on trainers thinking that we have a magical answer to get a dog to stop barking.

"How can I get my dog to stop barking? It drives me nuts!" This is one of the top questions that people ask, and one of the biggest complaints people have with their dogs.

There are some major issues with a dog that barks: First and foremost, it is a dog's natural instinct to bark. People talk, dogs bark. And when dogs bark, people yell and then the dog barks more. Can you see the vicious cycle in this?

Oftentimes dogs bark to alert and to get attention. Which means if a dog barks and you come out of your house to yell at him, you are *reinforcing* the barking, and by doing this, it won't ever go away. So, how can we stop a dog from barking? The old school way was to wait until a dog barks and then *tan the dogs hide* with a leather belt. This would crush the dog's spirit and usually stop the barking. Sort of like spanking a kid was the comparison. Recently we've opted for more "humane ways" like surgically "debarking" a dog if you've got enough cash. Honestly I can say that both of these methods are cruel, and downright stupid. Anyone who opts for these methods should probably not own a dog. Whooping a dog's butt is *wrong* and taking away his voice permanently is perhaps one of the most abusive things that one could do! But that's just my opinion. For those who think that surgery is a more humane option, I beg to differ. I would much rather have my ass kicked a couple of times rather than someone stealing my vocal chords. I'm sure some people will differ, but I'll stand up for my point on this.

Of course not advocating for either of these generally gives people the option to dump their dogs at the shelter and leaving them for dead. I can tell you that if your dog drives you nuts because he's barking, he's going to drive the next person nuts too. There aren't many requests from people visiting shelters looking for a dog that barks incessantly. So basically if you dump him because he has a problem, he's probably gonna end up dead because you didn't do the work to teach him the skills to keep him alive.

Now, let's address some simple and more humane solutions to solve this problem without being Nazis. I'll go on record here to say that I've never hit a dog to get them to stop barking and I would not suggest it to anyone for *any* reason. I'm merely drawing a comparison here. If you find a modern trainer, one who suggests never using a correction

on a dog, they will tell you: simply ignore the dog until he is quiet and then go to him. This works for a few dogs; namely the dogs that are barking because they want attention, but not the dog that has already gone too far and has developed a behavioral problem with barking. To solve a deeper problem, save your money on trainers and think this through. Your dog will bark at different times of the day and at different things. The trainer will stop by for an hour and show you how to approach the dog when he's quiet and how to ignore him when he barks. *Get it? Good.*

Now for the deeper problems: Dogs will bark and bark and eventually it will become a destructive habit. Citronella collars usually don't work if the dog has gone too far, and I'm not a big of bark collars because they are generally used on a very light setting and ramped up if the dog doesn't respond to the lower stimulation. I've retrained dogs with conventional electronic collars to stop barking, but that is a system of precise timing and proper stimulation to get the dog to understand that starting to bark is wrong, and stopping that habit is rewarding. This may or may not happen if a dog is hooked up to a collar that is solely controlled by the dog's own bark. In other words, the collar's stimulation is triggered by the dog's barking – *the dog barks – the collar shocks the dog.* It's best to teach the dog not to follow through on his desire to bark, in other words - *the avoidance of what makes him want to bark.*

When we look to change a dog's behavior (as in stopping the barking in this case) we look to teach a dog to avoid a behavior that leads to the barking: for example some dogs will start to pace a fence to get ready to start barking. If we see the dog starting the "trigger behavior" we can correct him and this will avoid the dog going into full flight and begin incessant barking. Some of the cheaper models of bark collars will actually shock your dog if the neighbor's dog barks. That's a good way to screw up your dog.

There are several things to do to get your dog to stop barking. Let's start out with basic training and giving your dog something productive to do. If your dog barks out of anxiety, you need to solve the problem of the anxiety first and foremost. Anxiety can be caused by boredom or separation. If that is the case, please read my article on *separation anxiety*. If your dog is to be left alone for long periods of time, I suggest getting the dog some good exercise before you leave if possible. Also, consider leaving the dog with some toys or treats that will occupy at least some of his time. A radio playing softly or even a talk radio is enough to keep a dog company to some degree. Make sure your dog has enough water and shelter if he's to be left outside. Best yet, have a doggie door so that he can get away from what causes him to bark. Most importantly, do not ever yell at your dog or go to your dog when he is barking, this will certainly reinforce his barking in his mind. If you're going to correct your dog for barking, it can only come from rewarding him for "not" barking. Barking and digging are instinctual behaviors that dogs do when they are bored. Dogs don't bark and dig when they are eating, so leaving toys around with treats inside will occupy the dog long enough to get him tired-out and avoid barking (usually). I like stuffing a Kong type toy with frozen meat or cheese and leaving that with my dog. It will occupy his time and his mind so that by the time he's done eating, he needs a rest.

Another solution that some people use is to teach their dogs to speak and then simply give an *out or quiet* command. This is valid, except it doesn't work when you're not there. It also has the likelihood to get a dog into a habit of barking because it's a rewarding behavior that the dog relates to a game. If your dog has a propensity to barking, I would not play these games because it sends very mixed signals to your dog, and that is cruel.

Remember, dogs bark – that's part of what makes them dogs. You should have known that before you got the dog, it should not come as a great shock to you. If you've never seen a dog before and were suddenly overcome with emotion to buy this new, strange, furry creature and then were shocked that it emits this sound called a bark, you have an excuse. But I think most people are very aware that dogs bark and that's part of the price we pay for having dogs.

If you start by training your dog, spending time with him, exercising him and giving him structure, it's highly unlikely that he will bark for no reason or become neurotic. If you give the dog what he needs, chances are he will be a well-balanced dog.

Looking for a quick fix in any area of behavior modification is for rip-off training tools or TV shows. Learn to understand your dog first and foremost. Give your dog the structure and training he needs right away. Don't think behaviors go away or get better – they don't. If something is bothering you now, fix it and get to the bottom of it. It's not fair to the dog to expect him to figure out what you want from him. It's your job to teach him what you want and reward him for doing it. Your dog deserves a rich and happy life with you, given this he will be a loving companion for many years.

If you have a puppy and think that's easier, think again. Puppies bark non-stop. The thing that makes the puppy situation worse is that we constantly go to the puppy when he barks; either to check on him to make sure he's ok or to tell him to be quiet. The best solution to stop a puppy from barking is to ignore it right from the beginning. The crazier he barks, the more you ignore it. He screams with moans of death – you ignore it. When he calms down, you go to him and then use a calm voice and reinforce the fact that he's quiet. A dog gets NO attention, good or bad, when he's barking. Get the dog used to being apart from you from *day one*. Isolate him for a few minutes to an hour from the beginning. The more he learns that you will return (and returning once he's calm) the more you will create a calm dog, and one that doesn't flip out when you have to leave for a little while. Don't fool yourself into thinking that the attention that you give your dog when he's young will last throughout his life – it won't. You're setting the dog up for failure, and that is cruel. The dog should be able to be in a room and see you and not flip out. If I see my dog act crazy when separated from me, I do not respond. If he calms down and I approach, if he gets crazy again, I stop in my tracks. He needs to sit calm when I am in front of his gate, door, etc. Then I will engage him.... Only then!

Dog training has inherent risks. I urge you to research and consult a professional for training advice.

Please visit my animal rescue organization and consider supporting our important work:
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