

# HUMANE SOCIETY OF INDIANAPOLIS

## Understanding and Managing Nuisance Barking

Vocalizing is natural behavior for dogs, although some dogs have stronger tendencies than others. “Nuisance” barking is defined by how and when it becomes a problem for people. Because dogs often receive mixed reinforcement for barking, it is unclear to them what barking is and is not appropriate. Clarifying the difference for the patron and for the dog is the primary challenge of working with barking problems.

### **Crating**

Crating will probably not decrease barking behavior. Dogs can bark just as well when confined in a crate. In fact, crating can make the problem worse if it increases fear or anxiety or if the dog is not accustomed to confinement.

### **Bark Collars**

The advantages to using an anti-bark collar are that the collars generally meet the criteria for effective and appropriate punishment: the punishment is delivered consistently, it is contingent upon the behavior, it is not associated with the owner, and it is sufficiently aversive to stop the behavior quickly. However, the quality and sensitivity of anti-bark collars vary widely. Some collars respond to sounds other than the dog’s bark, some continue to respond after the dog has stopped barking, and none will be effective unless the owner uses them properly, in coordination with appropriate behavior modification methods. *For those reasons, anti-bark collars should not be used except under the direction of a professional (someone who is trained in animal learning theory).* Some collars rely on an electric shock or a high-pitched tone as the aversive stimulus, but there are also some that work by spraying citronella. In one brief study, the citronella collar was more effective than a shock or tone collar. It is a more humane alternative and is more readily accepted by owners. However, it has the same limitations of other types of anti-bark collars. We only recommend that owners use a citronella bark collar.

### **Muzzles**

There are many types of muzzles available, and some can limit the extension of a dog’s mouth without totally restricting panting. However, even these “cage muzzles” or “greyhound muzzles” were not designed to be left on an unsupervised dog. Most dogs cannot drink and many cannot pant while wearing these muzzles. Most dogs will still be able to vocalize to some extent when muzzled, and the root cause of the barking problem is not addressed.

### **De-barking**

The effects of surgical de-barking on behavior have not been objectively evaluated. From a behavioral standpoint, there is no evidence to indicate that dogs who undergo this surgical procedure are harmed. They will still bark, but at a reduced volume. However, even the sound produced by a de-barked dog can create a problem and over time the effects of the surgery can diminish. Since a de-barked dog still barks for the same reasons, the benefits are minimal. If the root cause of the barking problem involves fear or anxiety, the dog will still experience the fear or anxiety. (Your organization may have a specific position statement about de-barking and other elective surgical procedures; the Dumb Friends League is opposed to de-barking. Your supervisor can advise you of appropriate protocol when a patron asks about de-barking as an answer to a barking problem.)

### **Punishment**

If the barking is fear-related (which includes separation anxiety), NO punishment of any type should be used. Punishment worsens problems caused by fear or anxiety. As with any behavior problem, it is most important that the cause of the problem is identified and techniques appropriate for the cause are implemented. Remote punishment can be part of the behavior modification program if it is correctly implemented and is not the only technique used. Direct punishment from the owner will likely inhibit the barking only when the dog thinks the owner is around and may also make the dog fearful of the owner.

### **A Note about “Doorbell Dogs”**

A common type of nuisance barking is one that occurs when the owner is present as well as when the owner is absent. Dogs who bark at doorbells are, of course, responding to specific environmental stimuli (mentioned above and in lists below), but this specific behavior can be very resistant to modification. Some examples of the challenges of resolving a “doorbell dog” problem are included in the chapter about learning theory.

An obedience brush-up is the basic recommendation for patrons who want to reduce or eliminate barking at doorbells. By teaching a command to replace the behavior, patrons can gain control over the dog's level of response to **doorbells when the patron is present**. Otherwise, treatment of a "doorbell dog" problem should follow the recommendations given for reaction to environmental stimuli and, in some cases, attention-seeking behavior.

### **Determining the Cause**

If you have a thorough and accurate history, it will lead you directly to a diagnosis. To determine which of the scenarios below is the most likely, the answer should be "yes" to most of the questions under each diagnosis category

#### **Separation Anxiety:** Refer to veterinarian or Animal Behavior Program Coordinator

- Does excessive, nuisance barking occur exclusively or primarily when the dog is left alone?
- Does the barking start shortly after the patron leaves?
- Does the dog often seem to be barking at nothing?
- Does it always occur after the dog is left alone or during a consistent pattern of absences?
- Does the dog display exaggerated, frantic greeting behaviors?
- Does the dog react (excitement, depression, anxiety) to the patron's preparations to leave the house?
- Does the dog frequently follow the patron from room to room (is he constantly underfoot, "clingy")?
- Does the problem frequently occur within the first 20-30 minutes after departure?
- Has there been a recent change in the family's routine or structure (another pet died, child leaving for college, change in work schedule, move to a new home)?

#### **Attention-Seeking behavior**

- Does the problem usually occur when the owner is home?
- Have attempts at punishment resulted in direct interactions between the dog and owner?
- Have the consequences of barking been reinforced in some way (e.g., the end of social isolation, eventually let inside, etc.)?
- Does the dog have either excessive or limited opportunities for social interaction with the owner?
- Does the dog bark to get whatever he wants?
- Does the owner have little control over the dog in general?
- Does problem barking often occur when the owner is on the telephone or watching TV?

#### **Fear or General Anxiety**

- Can the occurrence of the problem be related to things the dog is afraid of?
- Does the dog show fearful body postures when barking?
- Does the problem occur in response to the fear stimulus whether or not the patron is present?
- Does the dog have a known history of phobias?
- Can barking be elicited by presenting specific, feared stimuli?
- Is the dog known to be afraid of neighbors, children, et cetera?
- Have the owners tried punishment with the result that the dog is now worse?
- Is the dog aging, possibly losing hearing or eyesight?

#### **Social Isolation**

- Does the dog spend much of her time alone in the house or yard?
- Are the opportunities for play and social interaction with the owners limited?
- Is the dog's environment relatively impoverished, i.e., no other dogs or other animals to interact with, limited opportunities for physical and social activity?

#### **Reaction to specific environmental stimuli**

- Have the owners encouraged the dog to alert them to sounds (e.g., "What is that? What's out there? Go get 'em!")?
- Is the dog a breed type known for barking (e.g., most terriers and toy breeds, Beagle, Sheltie, Schnauzer)?
- Has the owner inadvertently reinforced the behavior?
- Is the dog barking at specific, identifiable stimuli?
- Does barking occur whenever those stimuli are present?
- Is excessive barking unrelated to the owner's presence or absence?

## Recommendations

Recommendations must be based on determining the cause of the barking. In many cases you will find a combination of triggers. Resolving nuisance barking problems usually requires modifying the household's schedule and the dog's environment in addition to using behavior modification techniques. When you feel that you have a good understanding of what is causing the barking behavior match the following recommendations to the appropriate category.

**Separation Anxiety:** Refer caller to either their veterinarian or the HSI Animal Behavior Program Coordinator.

In the meantime you can make general recommendations to the caller.

- Stop all punishment. Punishment will make the problem worse.
- Do not crate the dog, unless the caller knows that the dog is comfortable with being confined and is not going to attempt to break out or harm themselves. Instead, create other kinds of "safe places" when possible. A safe place should confine loosely rather than strictly (a room with a window and distractions rather than total isolation), should include access to busy toys for distraction, should include dirty laundry to lend a calming olfactory cue or other safety cues.
- Provide and rotate busy toys.
- Avoid comforting and/or soothing the dog while she displays anxious behavior. Reinforce calm or confident behavior.
- Implement "Nothing In Life is Free" to encourage confidence and positive associations.
- Consider the possibility of distracting and occupying the dog by taking her to visit a "doggie day care" or to stay with a friend several days a week.
- If the barking is occurring outdoors, test the consequences of leaving the dog in the house or garage for a short time. If successful, try extending the length of time. Some dogs with mild cases of separation anxiety feel safe indoors but not outdoors (or vice versa).
- If symptoms are severe, temporary use of appropriate medication that relieves anxiety. Patron should contact their a veterinarian.

## Attention-seeking behavior

- Identify what reinforces the behavior.
- Any punishment for the behavior should be remote, and **not** involve direct interaction with the owner. Loud noise, or water from a squirt gun or plant sprayer, can be used to startle and temporarily distract the dog.
- Implement the "Nothing In Life Is Free" technique to gain control over the dog's behavior
- Actively, consistently ignore the dog immediately when the barking starts. Patrons must be cautioned that it will get worse before it gets better and they must be prepared to outlast the dog *every time*. If they give in before the barking stops, they may actually shape the dog to bark even longer.
- Modify interactions between the dog and owner so that the dog receives attention when she is quiet (Catch your dog being successful!). The owners should never reinforce barking, even during play.
- Use a head halter to calm the dog and restrain him by putting steady pressure on the lead as soon as barking begins.
- If the dog barks to be let inside, teach another behavior such as pawing a bell.
- Teach a "quiet" command to give the dog a positive alternative to barking. Reward the dog for obeying a command and by stopping barking. The most effective is a combination of the use of an interrupter, a command to cease the barking, and an immediate reward.
- Provide consistent interactive play/exercise time that begins when the dog is behaving acceptably -- not when the dog demands it and not immediately before leaving the dog alone (which could worsen a mild case of separation anxiety).
- Enroll the dog in an obedience class and work with her consistently.
- Enlarge the dog's world by expanding her environment. Take walks along different routes and encourage exploration (on leash, with people).

**Fear or General Anxiety** Refer caller to their veterinarian or the HSI Animal Behavior Coordinator

In the meantime you can make general recommendations for support

- Identify what stimuli trigger the fearful behavior.
- Isolate the dog from fear-eliciting stimuli. This is very important to the effectiveness of the desensitization process.
- Punishment should never be used, since this will increase fear and anxiety and worsen the problem.
- Do not crate the dog unless the owner knows that the dog is comfortable in the crate and will not attempt to bust out of the crate and harm them. Crating can make a fear or anxiety problem worse. Instead, create other kinds of "safe places" when possible. A safe place should confine loosely rather than strictly (a room with a window and distractions rather than total isolation), should include access to busy toys for distraction, and should include dirty laundry to lend a calming olfactory cue or other safety cues.
- Do not force the dog into fear-inducing situations.

- Avoid comforting and/or soothing the dog while she displays fearful behavior. Reinforce calm or confident behavior. This might be achieved (at first) by distracting the dog with active play and reinforcing the behavior with “jolly talk”. As the dog calms, reinforce quiet, calm behavior.
- Implement “Nothing In Life is Free” to encourage confidence and positive associations.
- If symptoms are severe, temporary use of appropriate medication that relieves anxiety may be useful. Caller should consult with their veterinarian to discuss feasibility.
- A dog door may be helpful in some cases.
- If the barking occurs while the dog is outdoors, keep the dog inside more of the time, both with people and alone with lots of busy toys and distraction.

### **Social Isolation**

- Modify the environment to be more interesting, including the presence of appropriate busy toys; rotate toys weekly.
- Provide more frequent and more consistent opportunities for interactive play, exercise, and social activities with the patron, but not immediately before leaving the dog alone (which could worsen a mild case of separation anxiety).
- Enroll the dog in an obedience class and work with her consistently.
- Enlarge the dog’s world by expanding her environment. Take walks along different routes and encourage exploration (on leash, with people).
- If the problem is occurring outdoors, give the dog more indoor time with lots of distracting, positive things to do.
- Give the dog more indoor time with people.
- A dog door may be helpful in some cases as a way to restructure the dog’s daily routine.
- If the dog’s isolation is due to other behavioral problems (lack of housetraining, jumping on people, barking, destructive behavior, etc.), determine the cause of that problem and treat it accordingly.
- Especially while working on the cause of the problem, try to break up the dog’s day into smaller sections. Enlist friends and neighbors to visit and give them suggestions for low-key arrivals/departures and interactive play. When appropriate, try “doggie day care” a few days a week.
- Do not isolate the dog as punishment.

### **Investigative Behavior**

- Barking should never be reinforced or rewarded.
- Teach the “quiet” command.
- Identify the stimuli the dog is barking at.
- Provide more frequent and more consistent opportunities for interactive play, exercise, and social activities with the patron, but not immediately before leaving the dog alone (which could worsen a mild case of separation anxiety).
- Enroll the dog in an obedience class and work with her consistently.
- Enlarge the dog’s world by expanding her environment. Take walks along different routes and encourage exploration (on leash, with people).
- A dog door may be helpful in some cases as a way to restructure the dog’s daily routine.

### **Reaction to specific environmental stimuli**

- Barking should never be reinforced or rewarded.
- Identify the stimuli the dog is barking at.
- Teach the “quiet” command.
- Desensitize dog to being quiet in response to the stimuli:
  - ✓ Begin with stimulus far enough away that it does not trigger barking. Give the “quiet” command and reward.
  - ✓ Gradually move the stimulus closer, rewarding quiet behavior.
  - ✓ If dog barks, ignore it and move stimulus farther away.
  - ✓ Between sessions of counter conditioning, keep dog isolated from stimulus.
- Use a head halter. If the dog starts to bark as the stimulus is brought closer or made more intense, apply steady pressure on the lead to redirect the dog’s attention and use a “quiet” command.
- Patrons could consider use of an anti-bark citronella collar, but only as a supplement to other appropriate behavioral approaches and with the assistance of an animal behavior professional.



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— of Indianapolis —

### Nuisance Barking

<b>DIAGNOSIS</b>	<b>CLUES TO DIAGNOSIS (FROM HISTORY)</b>
<b>Separation Anxiety</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Barking occurs exclusively or primarily when dog is left alone, during consistent patterns of absence, or within the first 20–30 minutes after departure</li><li>• Barks at “nothing”</li><li>• Exaggerated, frantic greeting behavior – depression, excitement, aggression during preparation to depart</li><li>• Dog follows owner from room to room when home – “clingy”</li><li>• Major change in schedule or routine of dog</li></ul>
<b>Attention-Seeking</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Occurs when owner is present with consequences reinforcing the barking in some fashion – including punishment</li><li>• Unbalanced social time with owner – too much or too little</li><li>• Dog barks to shift attention from owner’s other activities or to get whatever she desires</li><li>• Evidence that owner has little control over dog</li></ul>
<b>Fear/General Anxiety</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Evidence that problem is related to specific stimuli, such as body postures or presentation of a given situation</li><li>• Physical changes such as loss of sight or hearing have occurred</li><li>• Problem occurs both in owner’s presence and absence</li><li>• Punishment has increased problem</li></ul>
<b>Social Isolation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Dog spends much of time alone –either in yard or home – with limited “people” time or social time with other animals</li><li>• Opportunities for both mental and physical exercise are limited</li><li>• No activities available when left alone, i.e., impoverished environment</li></ul>
<b>Reaction to Specific Environmental Stimuli</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Dog is a vocal breed-type</li><li>• Owner has encouraged dog to alert them to sounds</li><li>• Occurs when specific stimuli are presented repeatedly, whether owner is present or absent</li></ul>