

SOLVING THE BARKING PROBLEM

It's a paradox. The biggest suburban dog problem usually causes the owners of the dog no problem at all! At least, such is the case until this particular problem is reported to the local council, then the dog owner has a big problem!

The problem is that of the barking dog. Many dogs bark incessantly in their owner's absence, much to the annoyance of the next door neighbours that are left to battle with a constant barrage of barks blasting across the fence at all hours of the day and night. In many cases, the owners are not even aware of the problem until they either get a visit from a stern faced council official or they find the dog has been baited by the irate neighbour.

Perhaps your dog also barks at night when you lock it in the back garden or when you chain it up for the night. It may not cause you to lose sleep, because, if you chain the dog at the bottom of the garden, you may not even hear it, but you can guarantee it will keep the neighbours awake. To solve the barking problem we must concentrate on the origin of the behaviour rather than on the bark itself, as the bark is only a manifestation of a deeper behavioural problem.

Dogs have three different types of bark, namely the play bark, the alarm bark and the frustration or attention-seeking bark. It is the frustration or attention-seeking bark that is the biggest problem. It is found in cases where the dog is isolated from the family when, for instance, the family has visitors, or when the family has gone out, perhaps to work. The basic problem is boredom.

As dogs are by nature social or pack animals, they are not happy when isolated from other members of the pack, which in this case is the dog's human family. When isolated it is natural for them to bark to gain attention. If nobody is home then the bark only serves to annoy neighbours.

To overcome this attention-seeking bark, we need to confine the dog in its own pen or den. This is a very useful procedure as it simulates the natural place in which, for instance, a pack dog would sleep. Wild dogs choose to sleep and rest in dens generally consisting of a hollowed out log or a cave in an embankment. When inside these dens, they are safe from other marauding dogs and they are warm, dry and comfortable. The wild dog never barks inside its den as this would be advertising the den's location. When in its den, the dog is serene and relaxed and certainly not anxious.

Thus to sidestep separation anxiety problems, which include hole digging and dogs ripping the washing off the line, as well as barking, you should create a den for your dog to sleep in and lock him in the den when you leave for work.

To create a den, firstly select or make a small room about six feet by eight feet. A laundry, tool room or bathroom is often ideal. Secondly, put a comfortable bed in that room for the dog to sleep on and thirdly put the dog's water bowl in the room. Leave it there at all times so that, even if the dog is free in the garden, it has to voluntarily go into the room to get a drink. Lastly and most importantly, whenever the dog is fed, give the food to him in the den.

While feeding the dog, make a big fuss and elicit as much tailwagging happiness in it as possible. Then command the dog to sit and make him stay for several seconds before commanding him to eat his food. Once the dog is guzzling his food down, leave immediately and lock the door of the den behind you. Return in fifteen minutes, release the dog and have a big game with him.

In this manner, the dog associates happiness with being locked in the den and also with being released from it. Happiness is a direct opposite to anxiety, thus this procedure will dispel every trace of anxiety and the dog will enjoy his period of confinement. You may like to re-ignite the dog's happiness by giving him a small food reward when you confine him in the morning before leaving for work. A big raw marrow bone works well for this purpose as the bone will keep the dog occupied for some hours .

Do not allow your dog to bark incessantly. Act now to stop this all too common problem before you get a knock on the door from a stern council official or a justifiably irate neighbour.

Adapted from an article by Dr. Cam Day, courtesy RSPCA Qld.