



WHY DOES MY DOG BARK?



Barking is a normal behaviour for dogs and makes up part of the way they communicate vocally, along with yipping, yelping, howling, growling and whining.

It is normal for a dog to bark when there is a noise at the boundary of their territory, like a knock at the front door. But it is not normal for the dog to bark for two hours after a single knock, or to bark at every noise that occurs. A normal dog would learn they only have to bark a few times when the noise occurs and they quickly learn to ignore commonly occurring noises.

Irrespective of why the dog is barking and whether or not it is normal, it is the second most common complaint made to local councils.

Understanding why dogs bark

The situation the dog is in when it barks will reveal the motivation behind the barking.

Dogs commonly bark when they are excited or aroused, for example, when they are playing, see prey or come into contact with other dogs in their social group.

Dogs also commonly bark when they are distressed, such as being put in a new situation, left alone in an unfamiliar environment, in physical discomfort or pain or when they hear other dogs barking or howling.

They will also bark when they are startled or alarmed, like when they hear a new noise or are approached by another dog or unknown person.

Boredom or frustration can also be triggers for barking. And when a dog barks in a certain situation it may learn that barking is a worthwhile behaviour. If a dog decides that a behaviour is worth doing, it will repeat the behaviour in the same situation in the future, but if the dog believes the behaviour is not worthwhile it will not waste its time or energy doing it again.

How do behavioural problems affect barking?

One explanation for extreme barking is that the dog is anxious. Being anxious is normal in certain situations but an anxiety disorder is more than this. It is when the default behaviour of the dog is to anticipate threats in any new situation or in a situation that it does not know how to act to remain safe.

A dog suffering from this type of anxiety disorder will bark in many more situations than a normal dog. It will perceive any noise or movement as threats and will be more likely to learn that barking is worthwhile in more situations.

Treatment of barking dogs

Your vet can help you to develop a behavioural management plan. They can first determine if there are any underlying conditions that are causing the barking such as arthritis, liver disease and canine cognitive dysfunction. These conditions must be dealt with before, or in conjunction with, a behavioural management plan.

Developing a behavioural management plan requires understanding of when and why a dog is barking, and can't be determined by assessing only one occurrence in which the dog barked. A full assessment requires a comprehensive analysis of all situations in which a dog starts barking.

A behavioural management plan includes the following components:

- Making sure there are no medical or behavioural abnormalities contributing to the barking.
- Ensuring the dog's physical and mental needs are being fully met, for example a nutritional diet and plenty of exercise.
- Determining why the dog believes that barking is worthwhile.
- Removing the reason why the dog believes barking is worthwhile.
- Working with a professional dog trainer to teach the dog to be quiet when requested.
- Learning how to use distraction techniques to give the dog something better to do.
- Teaching the dog how to relax using reward-based training techniques.

