



BARKING MAD?



From Dog Box training School by Susan Henderson©

Monkeys, baboons, squirrels and rhino bark, so the phenomenon is not peculiar to dogs. The chirping of birds, tape recorded and played back at slower speeds, sounds surprisingly similar to the bark of a dog. Barking is usually a warning that someone or something is approaching. The alarm does not indicate whether the person approaching is friend or foe, but merely acts as an alert, "Halt, who goes there?" When this individual has been identified, the behaviour changes, and if the subject is seen as a friend then the dog may whimper and wag its tail. If the visitor is considered potentially hostile then the dog will growl and become threatening.

A bark consists of a changing pitch that rises and falls sharply. Changes in pitch indicate different meanings. A low pitch denotes an angry and aggressive emotional state. It would be prudent to avoid an animal producing such a sound. A low growl is a warning to stay away. A high pitched whimpering sound indicates that the animal is not threatening or challenging and that you may approach. Psychologists have found that when angry or threatened the human voice drops to a lower register. On the other hand when a human wants to be friendly and encourage closer contact the voice rises in pitch.

Dogs also modify the meanings of a particular pitch by adjusting the duration of the sound. Shorter sounds communicate fear, pain or need. A high pitched whining sound shortened becomes a yelp of pain, whereas lengthened it becomes a whimper of pleasure or playfulness. A sustained low-pitched growl indicates that the dog has no intention of backing down, but if the growl is in short bursts then there is an element of fear and the dog is worried and would prefer to avoid a confrontation.

Repetition of sounds denotes the level of urgency in the situation. Unrepeated or spaced-out sounds suggest reduced levels of excitement or a momentary distraction. Rapidly repeated sounds indicate urgency, excitement and arousal.

Humans have selectively bred dogs that bark. A dog's vocal warning indicating that intruders are around was very valuable for community security purposes. It was also valuable to hunters. *Terra*, the Latin for terrier, means earth or ground. This was due to the terrier's ability to follow game into its burrow and flush it out or kill it. Terriers were selectively bred to bark while pursuing their prey in order to let the hunters know where to uncover the foxes or badgers and also where the hunters could retrieve their dogs. It is obvious that barking in hunting dogs is counterproductive because it alerts the prey to the exact location of the predator and would make escape easier. Thus, apart from selectively-bred dogs such as terriers, most dogs hunt silently. This indicates how humans are largely responsible for selectively breeding for barking and encouraging barking in dogs.

Responsible dog-ownership requires that we do not allow our dogs to become an environmental nuisance with persistent barking. Dogs do need to be able to express themselves by vocal means but we need to educate ourselves so that we understand what the dog is saying and respond appropriately. Dogs understandably become frustrated when the message they are trying to convey by barking is not understood or heeded. Knowledge of the various barks and their meanings will give understanding, insight and patience and enable one to calmly assess the situation and act appropriately.

Frustration barking consists of repetitive, monotonous barks sometimes ending with a howl and then repeated. This is a vocalisation of the stereotypical behaviour as seen in zoo animals or mental homes, where we see animals pacing back and forth or patients rocking to and fro. Repeating the same vocalisation or motion produces hormones which have a soothing effect, and so the behaviour becomes addictive. This is a terrible state of mind and a desperate way of coping with inescapable stress. The solution to this type of barking is to remove the cause of frustration. Give the dog something to occupy itself with. Take the dog for walks. Allow it to use its senses by sniffing and exploring. Play with it. Do the necessary to make its life more interesting. Dogs are social animals that need to be with their families. If you have taken a dog into your home it needs to be with the family, not relegated to the backyard or tied up with nothing to do but bark.

Guard barking often begins with a growl followed by barks, interspersed with more growls. The dog feels threatened and is trying to make the threat go away. He feels the need to defend himself, his loved-ones and his territory. The body will be positioned forward or the dog will lunge forward. Some breeds will instinctively have a strong guarding disposition. It is important when such breeds are kept as pets in a social environment that you do not reinforce their inherent tendency to guard. It is imperative that you enrol these types of dogs in a good puppy school that only uses positive training methods.

The warning bark is a short sharp “woof” which means “get away, danger is approaching”. Often the human families do not understand the meaning of this bark and so the dog feels the need to repeat itself. The dog then learns that it is necessary to repeat in order to be heard. The result is a barking problem. Since the dog feels duty-bound to warn his family of potential danger we need to show the dog we understand the message and will deal with the situation. Calmly place yourself between the perceived threat and the dog who will then know you have heard him and taken control.

Excitement barking is heard as an hysterical-sounding, high pitched series of barks. Barking is constant or consists of a series of barks interspersed with small breaks. Whining may occur between the barks. Stress levels are high and the muscles charged with adrenalin prevent the dog from keeping still. The dog will jump up and down, run back and forth and the tail will be wagging. The dog is happy and excited and will probably grab hold of something to carry around in its mouth. Remain calm and ask the dog to sit for a few seconds.

Fear barking consists of a long series of high pitched barks, superficially similar to excitement barking but clearly marked by the discernible fear in the voice. Sometimes this hysterical series of barks ends in a howl, a plea for help. The dog will be restless, running back and forth, peering out of windows, scratching at doors and trying to get out. The most common reasons for fear are being left alone or tied up with no avenue of escape, sudden and/or loud noises, threatening behaviour from people or other animals, an aggressive atmosphere in the home-environment or from family

members, loss of freedom of movement or being held tightly, exposure to unfamiliar or strange objects (for example, a crash helmet or a flying kite). Do not behave in a way that will make the dog more afraid. Act calmly. If you cannot remove the source of the fear then seek behavioural counselling for your dog so that desensitising training can be implemented.

Learned barking occurs when the owner inadvertently reinforces barking. The dog will bark and then stop to look around for attention, and then bark again. Try to find what triggers this and then train an alternative behaviour in place of the barking. It is important to ensure that nothing you do in this situation is perceived by the dog as a reward for barking.

Barking is a dog's way of expressing an emotion. We need to allow it and yet make sure it doesn't become an environmental nuisance or a substitute coping mechanism of a stressed dog. The incessant barking of ill-trained or neglected dogs is an intolerable nuisance in a neighbourhood and amounts to anti-social and unlawful behaviour on the part of the owners.