

Hark, the Hairy Angels Bark And Bark And Bark

By Wayne Hunthausen, DVM



Why do our dogs bark? To drive us crazy, of course. And some breeds are better at it than others – like beagles. It's not that I am prejudiced, some of my best friends are beagles. But few breeds have it over these guys when it comes to letting their presence be known. A beagle always has something to say, and he usually don't care if you are listening or not. But does he always have to tell the same tale over and over again? I once knew a beagle named Barney. His barking was the canine version of water torture. If my grade school nun had known about Barney, she would have brought him to class to get us to finish our assignments. "Good morning students. This is Barney. In a few minutes he will start barking and will continue barking until each one of you finishes your 200 word essay on your summer vacation." We'd have written those essays in record time.

Barking can actually serve an important function by letting us know when some odious intruder might be prowling about, such as a thief or an IRS auditor. But if your pet is barking all of the time, it's the canine version of 'Crying wolf.' Besides being quite annoying, your pet loses its effectiveness and value as a guard.

In addition to sounding an alarm, dogs will bark to tell us "I'm here", "Come back", "Do something for me" or "Feed me. Feed me. Feed me." Some dogs are quite smart about using their voices to get fed. Now if we could just harness that pushy mentality and drive to help drum up donations for the local humane shelter!

An Ounce of Prevention

If your pup grows up in a sheltered environment it's more likely to end up causing noise pollution. During the early months of life, your puppy needs to learn all about life, so it will be more confident when it grows up. It's very important that it meets all types of people – young and old, men and women, quiet and obnoxious, people of different size and color. It's also important that it's exposed to all types of noises and activities during this time. If you plan on marching in the St. Patty's Day parade with your pet, you need to get it used to bagpipes and crowds while it's still young. Teach it about lawn mowers, trucks, the mailman and kids on skate boards. Barking is often used to say "I believe this might be a threatening situation." The more your young pup learns about life, the less frequently it will sound false alarms.

Don't Start Bad Habits

First of all, don't encourage your puppy to bark. If it's important for you that the pup grows up to be a good guard dog, have some patience. Most young dogs don't begin this type of barking until nine months of age or older. If you encourage territorial barking in a young puppy, you'll end up with a barking maniac by the time it's an adult.

Other things that can lead to barking problems include social isolation and boredom. Puppies that are left alone for long periods in the yard behind a fence or on a chain usually turn into barking extremists as they grow older. With little to do in the yard, young pups tend to entertain themselves by crooning out to the neighborhood.

You also want to be careful not to let your puppy get into the habit of using barking to tell you what to do. It's OK for the pet to give an appropriate bark to be let out, but don't allow it to constantly order you around with bossy barking. I've known a lot of people who were gradually sucked into doing their pet's every bidding. A bark to go for a walk or a pet on the head, a bark for a biscuit, a bark to go for a car ride. Pretty soon, a bark or two will have you scurrying out to an all night gourmet doggie deli across town in the rain to buy some lamb and rice croissants. Then it won't be long until your pet starts telling you what to wear and what type of music to play. Not a pretty scene! You have to be strong and resolve to ignore those cute, but pushy, little puppy barks.

Dealing with the Noisy Dog

Ok, so you read the information above on preventing barking problems, but it's too late. You're mischievous little sprite has already progressed beyond simple sonatas to Wagnerian overtures. What can be done now? The first thing you need to do is look for underlying issues that trigger the barking. If it barks at animals or people through the window, close the drapes or place furniture in front of the window. Move bird feeders, squirrel feeders and mailboxes so the pet can't see activity around them. Leave a radio on with soft music played loud enough that the pet can't hear noises outside of the home.

Does the pet have too much time on its hands, er paws? Give it some mental stimulation. Be sure it has toys that will keep it occupied when you're gone, like Kongs® or other toys that can be stuffed with treats. A couple long periods of aerobic exercise each day will wear out most dogs and reduce some of the **motivation** to bark. Of course if you own a Labrador, you know these guys usually need a bit more time on the track – somewhere around 25 hours of exercise per day might be enough, if you're lucky. It really boils down to basic doggy physics. More energy spent running equals less energy available to bark. Remember the Zen trainer's mantra, "Tired dogs are good dogs."

Some pets bark due to separation anxiety which occurs when a dog becomes hyper-attached to family members. Dogs with separation anxiety need to be taught to be less anxious when you leave and to gradually tolerate your long absences from home. Giving the pet less attention on demand when you are at home can help. For the pet with an advanced case of separation anxiety, medication may be necessary.

"Quiet" By Request

Teach the pet to be quiet on command if you don't want to stop all barking, but want to have some control over the bad boy's mouth. Whenever the dog barks, immediately say "Quiet," call it and request a sit-stay for a reward. Be sure to do this even when it just utters a tiny woof. Eventually, you won't even have to call it. Your dog will automatically bark and go look for you instead of staying at the window and barking its head off. Every time it disregards your request, immediately repeat a much louder "Quiet" and interrupt the barking with a water gun or sharp noise (referee's whistle, shake can, airhorn), or pull it toward you with its leash. If the pet continues to bark when you pull on the leash, use a head halter like a Gentle Leader®. This will allow you to close the pet's mouth with a little pull. By asking it to be quiet every time it barks, and immediately calling it to reward quiet behavior, you teach it to sound a diminutive alarm and then look for you. The second, loud, instructive "Quiet" command and accompanying loud noise for ignoring your request teaches the pet you mean business. With time you'll find that the dog will ignore things that used to make it bark. At that point, you bring out the rewards. Every time a situation occurs when the dog would usually bark, but doesn't, praise it, and give a very special meat or cheese flavored treat. Be careful not to reinforce the barking by giving the dog any attention or anything it wants when it barks. Even a light scolding may act as a reinforcement if the pet really wants your attention.

Barking In Your Absence

Barking that occurs when the family isn't with the pet, can be a challenge to correct. It's usually easier

to correct indoor behavior problems, such as chewing and housesoiling, and move the dog inside than it is to solve barking in the yard. This is a situation where a bark-activated training collar may be necessary. There are different types of anti-bark collars available. Some work by emitting an interruptive ultrasonic noise when the dog barks. They are not effective on all dogs, but do provide a humane, inexpensive solution for some barking problems. Shock collars come in a variety of styles and are relatively effective. They work by providing an electrical stimulus when the dog barks. For some dogs, the stimulus is a mere distraction, but for many it is painful. Pain can be a dangerous training tool since it can trigger aggression. A risk with these collars is that if a person or another pet is next to the dog when it is shocked, the pet might mistakenly think that the pain came from that person or dog, and attack. These collars are definitely not suited for all dogs. The use of shock should be discussed with your veterinarian or trainer to see if it is appropriate. If you need to use a collar, the most effective and humane collar is the new ABS® spray collar (called the Aboistop in Canada and Europe). It emits a citronella spray that effectively interrupts barking without hurting the pet.

As you can see, barking problems are much easier to prevent than correct. So, don't encourage barking by your cute little puppy or let noisy serenades pass by without intervening because it seems cute coming from a little squirt. It won't seem cute later when your little Pavarotti is bigger and louder.