

Training your dog:

Barking

Puppy Barking:

When a puppy is taken away from his littermates for the first time he is likely to be anxious and lonely when left alone for the first few nights, especially if he has been the centre of attention in his new family during the day. He may bark, howl and scratch at the door when shut away, to try to rejoin the rest of his new “pack”. It is most important not to reward this behaviour by going to him or allowing him to sleep in the bedroom, or he will never learn to settle quietly on his own.

Solutions:

Instead, prepare a warm, cosy bed for him in a corner of the room or, better still, in an indoor kennel or crate. He should have a warm blanket to snuggle into and access to a newspaper covered area next to his bed in case he needs to toilet during the night. It may help to leave a radio on quietly so he doesn't feel totally alone. For the last half hour or so before bedtime don't fuss or play with him, just let him relax and wind down. Settle him quietly and without too much fuss in his bed and leave him.

Don't go to him when he barks as this rewards the barking, even if you are cross with him, and he will continue to do it. Most puppies settle after the first night or two.

Barking for attention:

Some dogs develop the annoying habit of barking for attention when you are talking on the phone, carrying on a conversation, watching TV or reading the newspaper. This may escalate to include racing round the room barking or running to the door barking. Dogs that bark a lot in this way have been rewarded for it with human attention, and so the behaviour becomes worse and worse. Even being cross with the dog is seen as attention and so rewards the barking.

Solutions:

The way to cure this is to completely ignore the dog while he is barking and only give attention when he is quiet. It may be necessary to distract the dog in order to stop him barking by squirting with a water pistol or dropping a bunch of keys or creating a similar sudden noise. Where the dog stands in front of you barking the best approach is to leave the room shutting the door behind you, only returning when he is quiet. This is the opposite of what he wants and is usually very effective.

Boredom:

Bored dogs may bark and vocalise when left alone, as they try to find something to occupy them, and young dogs especially need plenty of both physical and mental exercise. Where boredom is the reason both when you are at home and when you are out, they are simply looking for something to do when there is nothing else exciting going on.

Working breeds such as Border Collies, German Shepherds etc are particularly likely to become bored and destructive when left alone for long periods.

Solutions:

Increase the amount of exercise the dog is getting, particularly when he is going to be left alone. A really good, long energetic run (at least an hour free running) first thing in the morning will help to tire the dog and make him less restless. Make sure he has at least half an hour to settle after exercise before you leave him.

If possible, arrange for someone to come and walk the dog during the day for you if you are going to be out all day.

Have a session of obedience training every day to stimulate the dog mentally as well as physically.

Leave plenty of safe things for him to chew when you go out, such as a stuffed Kong or a Buster Cube which he has to work at, or hard nylon chews or baked bones. Remove all these things on returning home so that he only has access to them when you are not there with him.

Separation Anxiety:

The dog may be unable to cope with isolation and separation from his owners - this gives rise to stress and anxiety with physical symptoms that the dog is unable to control, and may be manifest not only in barking and howling, but also in house soiling and/or destructive behaviour when left alone. (Rescue dogs are particularly prone to this condition, especially if they have been rehomed more than once). The dog howls and barks, not from boredom, but in an effort to "call back" the absent members of his "pack". Any destructiveness tends to be aimed at exit points, such as door or window frames, carpets and skirting boards, although other items may also be destroyed - often things that smell strongly of the owners such as clothing, cushions or bedding.

Dogs suffering from Separation Anxiety are usually very clingy, staying close to their owners and following them everywhere around the house.

This is a behaviour problem, and requires careful and sympathetic treatment, and, sometimes, supportive drug therapy. If you feel your dog suffers from Separation Anxiety rather than the more easily managed problems described above, contact the surgery for a behaviour consultation. In the mean time, it is important to remember that Separation Anxiety is a condition with physical symptoms that the dog cannot control, and punishment is pointless and counter-productive.

This information has been compiled by Sarah Coton, Head Veterinary Nurse and Canine Behaviour Consultant at our Warwick centre. Further advice is available by appointment.

For more information

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