

HARK, HARK, THE DOG DOTH BARK: SILENCING THE DOG THAT BARKS WHEN LEFT ALONE

Of all dog behavior problems, perhaps the most distressing one is the dog who barks when left alone. Incessant volleys of yips, woofs and whines just don't make it for those who live in close quarters or for those who need some peace and quiet in their life! These latchkey barkers fit several profiles. It is important to determine which one or more describes your dog; misreading the dog may result in failure.

1/ THE GENETICALLY PRONE BARKER

Virtually all terriers, and many small dogs, particularly Lhasa Apsos, Poodles and Schnauzers fit into this category. These breed types have been pre-programmed; they bark at movement or noise within their "range". Sensitive alarm barkers once bred to alert the farmer of the fox in the hen house, now announce that the phone is ringing, the neighbors are home or that the elevator has arrived. They must be trained to limit their barking. Training them to bark on command gives you control; you can turn it "on" or "off" on your orders! It's not that you don't want them to bark; you just want them to be appropriate. Find a suitable place or time where the yappy dog can bark to his heart's content.

2/ THE ALPHA/TERRITORIAL BARKER

These barkers are most often unneutered males and/or guarding breed types. They believe that they are protecting their yard, house and general "air-space" from intruders such as the mailman, a squirrel, a passing dog or a neighbor. Neutering may take the overprotective and/or territorial edge off the intact dog. Training will get the genetically protective dogs' instincts in line. Blocking the dog's view of the property lines (stockade instead of chain-link fencing) and keeping him from patrolling the area around the front door or front porch may assist in cutting down the owner-absent barking. Monitor this type of dog carefully; do not permit him to bark at passersby when you are home. If you cannot silence him when you are there, you can't expect much when you're not.

3/ THE BORED UNDEREXERCISED DOG

Sporting, hound and herding breed types were bred to work all day long. Many retrievers, pointers, setters, collies and the like find themselves sadly under-exercised, especially in the urban environment. These dogs need to be kept busy, if not, boredom turns into

barking (not to mention chewing, pacing and digging). Most need at least 2 (TWO) hours of vigorous, aerobic exercise a day. If you are going to be gone for an extended period of time (6+ hours), an hour of mentally challenging and physically active fun and games is mandatory. You should leave behind a panting, heaving, utterly exhausted dog as you set off for the day.

4/ THE FEARFUL, NEUROTIC DOG

Many of these dogs fall into the category of toy and miniature breed types. Dogs that have been passed around from home to home and shelter rescues also fit into this group. Their histories may include coddling and over-protective handling, lack of socialization or isolation. Dogs that have never been out of the back yard or permanently paper trained apartment dwellers are candidates for anxiety behaviors if placed in a new home environment. These dogs suffer from separation anxiety when left behind, even for brief periods. Chewing, barking, house soiling and digging are some typical responses. The majority of these dogs need to be properly socialized to the world around them. Obedience work with plenty of praise builds confidence, yielding a more stable dog; a dog with a better ability to cope.

The neurotic dog may feel less stressed out when home alone if he's confined to a kennel crate --either the enclosed airline type (molded plastic) or a wire crate draped with a sheet or a tablecloth. With less space to worry about --just the bed and a chew toy, many dogs just curl up and calm down. A word of warning regarding dogs with severe anxiety problems (often a shelter dog): some dogs may go to pieces in a crate; they will shake, slobber, struggle and exhibit extreme escape behavior. In these instances you must seek counsel of a professional dog trainer and/or veterinarian that is well versed in canine behavior problems and can customize a program for the dog that may include short term drug therapy.

ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGES TO MINIMIZE OWNER-ABSENT BARKING

1. Keep the dog in the quietest part of the house. A dog with behavior problems has not earned "the run of the house".

2. Keep curtains and/or shades drawn. If you don't have adequate window coverage, get some; hang a sheet or blanket across the window. A darker environment has a calming effect on most dogs. Additionally, there is no visual stimuli to provoke the territorial or bored dog. Curtains muffle sounds from the outdoors for alarm barkers.