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Controlling Barking

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Over the past several months I have been discussing various behavior issues which are common problems for dog owners. This month it is time to get the neighbors involved!

When Rex was chewing the sofa we were all annoyed, but we got that problem solved. When Rex was digging up the back yard, as much of a problem as that was, we got it solved too. Now the neighbors are having meetings that you haven't been invited to. You are on a first-name basis with Bob from animal control. And you keep looking for the petition from the neighborhood watch with your name on it. Rex has a barking problem!

A dog that chews up your sofa and shoes is a problem to you. A dog that barks excessively is a frustration and a nuisance to you and the whole neighborhood as well. This problem must, therefore, be addressed quickly and effectively.

We may all wish we had a dog that would never again chew up a shoe or dig up the flower bed, but there are times when we would all like our dogs to bark to warn us of a stranger in the back yard or scare off a prowler.

The real task is to teach the dog what is and what is not an appropriate time to bark and how much barking is enough. We must also establish a level of communication the dog can understand and not expect the dog to have human reasoning abilities.

So armed with this beginning level of understanding, let's set about finding a solution to the problem of inappropriate barking.

Defuse and control. The first step is to control the immediate situation to give us time to complete the training needed for a long-term solution.

If Rex, the barking wonder dog, is currently confined to the back yard, then move him inside. If he is already spending most of his time indoors, then keep him there unless he is supervised outside. The idea is first to eliminate the level of irritation with the neighbors, not to prolong the situation while we are trying to train the dog.

Solicit the neighbor's assistance in specifically defining

Rex's barking problem. This can be especially helpful if Rex has the habit of barking only when you are not at home. Precisely when does Rex bark? Is it when school gets out and the kids are going by on the street? Is it triggered by a neighborhood cat or the mailman or car traffic in the area? All of these things can help us define the inappropriate behavior we need to solve. Dogs are pack animals and, as such, are very territorial. A stranger invading the pack's territory (your yard) will nearly always provoke a warning bark from Rex.

If a specific neighbor or your landlord has complained about Rex's barking, then address that complaint directly. Do not become argumentative or defensive, but rather explain that you understand there is a problem and you are working to correct the situation.

Once we have eliminated the immediate irritation, we can begin to work on a long-term training solution.

Barking on command. When we are away, when we are busy in the kitchen, or elsewhere in the house, when we have several other distractions demanding our attention --- in short, when it's most inconvenient --- that's when the barking problem most often occurs. Finding a good way to work with the dog, at a convenient time, when training can be effective, is an obstacle we face in solving any behavior problem. When we are hold the door for the delivery person, paying for the pizza and trying to make sure our order is correct is definitely not the time to be teaching Rex quiet.

If we are to control Rex's barking and teach him when it is appropriate to bark, or more importantly when it is not appropriate to bark, we must first be able to make him bark and be silent on command. We must teach Rex "speak" and "quite".

Find something, anything, that will make Rex bark. Waving a stick, shaking a toy, whatever. This may be the hardest part of this entire process but it's worth the effort. Obviously, because you are reading this article so intently, something makes Rex bark. Teaching speak then becomes a simple repetitive process of waving the stimulus and saying, "Rex, speak! Speak." If Rex barks, he should be rewarded. "Good boy, Rex! Good speak!" Once Rex has learned the meaning of the word speak,

eliminate the stimulus. Now you should be able to get Rex to bark on command. "Rex, speak" should cause him to bark.

A caution before we move on to teaching quiet. I train through positive reinforcement. I firmly believe that one of the easiest ways to reward Rex during initial training is through the use of treats. Food rewards when teaching speak, however, should be kept to a minimum if not eliminated completely. If food becomes the stimulation that causes Rex to speak, then Rex will continue to bark for food...all food...whether it is his or not. I recently had a dog in obedience class who had been taught to speak for treats. I train with treats. Sit caused the dog to bark, down caused the dog to bark, stay caused the dog to bark. Training the dog next to him caused him to bark. Be wary of using treats when training your dog to speak.

We will find teaching Rex "quiet" to be even easier than we did teaching "speak". The principle in teaching quiet is one of understanding a normal canine instinct. Rex relies heavily on his nose to guide his daily activities. While we already know that Rex can bark readily, Rex can not bark and sniff at the same instant, it's a physical impossibility. If Rex is barking and we place a dog treat on his nose, he will sniff it to see if he wants it. When he sniffs, he must stop barking even if it is only for two seconds.

Give Rex the command to speak. While he is barking, touch him on the nose with a treat and say, "Rex, quiet". When he stops barking, even for a few seconds, say "Good boy, Rex! Good quiet" and give him the treat. Now all we need to do is to repeat this process over and over and gradually increase the time that Rex is required to remain quiet in order to get the treat and praise. You should be able to extend the time a dog will remain quiet on command to a couple of minutes.

With a few more sessions of practice Rex should be well on his way to reliably responding to "speak" and "quiet" on command. What we have done is build in an effective "on/off switch" for our dog's barking.

Barking etiquette. We have both controlled the neighborhood situation temporarily and developed a way to make Rex bark or, more importantly, stop barking on command. Now, it's only a matter of teaching Rex when we consider barking appropriate and when we don't. In our position as pack leader, Rex will accept our authority controlling his barking. Remember, however, what we discussed in the beginning. We need to keep it to a dog's level of understanding. "Always" or "never" is acceptable, "sometimes" is not.

What you consider appropriate is entirely up to you. This will be based on lifestyle, neighborhood and personal preferences. You need only decide what you want and then build it into individual training sessions. As an example, we will assume that we live on a moderately busy residential street in a suburban neighborhood. We have a medium front yard with a city sidewalk in front and a private walk up to the front steps.

I would not want Rex to bark at everyone who walks past the house on the sidewalk. I would, however, consider it desirable for him to bark when they approach the front door.

What will not work. Shouting at Rex when he is in the back yard will not work. From his viewpoint this is simply, "I was barking at that bird over there, and now the pack leader has joined in. I must be doing right!"

Chasing after Rex when he is barking and yanking on his collar will only serve to excite him and stir him up further and will not effectively control barking. It will teach him to bark while running away from you!

As in all training, hitting, slapping or "spanking" is never appropriate. It may teach Rex to never bark in front of you and it will definitely make him meaner and more frightened around you and strangers. If you think barking is a problem with the neighbors, just wait until they come over to tell Rex to be quiet and get bitten in the process!

Test for effectiveness. Now that we are well on the way to successful training, it is time to revisit the neighbors or the landlord. Take Rex with you and demonstrate the progress you have made. Ask the neighbors for their personal evaluation of the situation as they see it. Have they noticed an improvement? Do they see any area that we still need to work on? Explain when you have taught Rex to bark and why you feel that is a value to the neighborhood. "Rex will still bark if a stranger approaches our house and that could warn us of a prowler in the area."

Do not expect 100% immediate acceptance or 100% success but we should be, by now, much improved and well on our way to making Rex a welcome member of the community.

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From the [PETSMART News](#).