



WOMEN'S
ANIMAL CENTER
America's First Animal Shelter

Backyard Blues

Solitary Confinement is How We Punish Social Animals

Dogs were domesticated by humans to perform a variety of functions, the most common of which is companionship. Dogs form extremely strong social bonds and their most important psychological need is to be around the people they are bonded to. Making a dog live in the backyard is an unnatural, lonely existence – they need to live with you.

People sometimes mistakenly believe that a dog, like livestock, will be happier with fresh air, grass and more room to “run around.” But when did you last see a happy, relaxed backyard dog “running around” his yard? Such dogs are inevitably sad, bored and lonely, wanting only to be able to spend time with their families in the house. When they manage to get human contact, they are desperately over-excited from deprivation and are likely to misbehave. Ironically, most dogs that are banished to the yard never develop house manners or social skills and so, if they are tried in the house, do poorly and re-condemn themselves to solitude. The humans also miss out on the benefits of dog companionship.

Backyard dogs suffer from greatly increased incidence of aggression, digging, barking and howling problems and are at elevated risk of being relinquished to animal shelters. They are too hot in the summer, too cold in the winter, often lack adequate shelter and fresh water, and are often dirty and ungroomed.

What You Can Do

- Please don't get a dog, large or small, unless you are prepared to let him live with you in the house. This means investing time in housetraining, chewtraining, daily walks, and teaching good manners. It also means buying appropriate toys.
- If you would like to leave your dog in the yard for part of the day when you're gone, make sure the fence is visually opaque so that he is not teased by the sight of passersby or tormented by kids. Leave him chew toys, proper shelter and fresh water. Bring him in when you're home and provide daily walks. Being outside in the yard does not count as “exercise.” Make sure he is micro-chipped, appropriately vaccinated, and wears an identification tag.
- Help educate about the plight of backyard dogs. It is psychological cruelty.

Barking

Dogs bark for a variety of reasons:

- Watchdog Barking serves the dual purpose of alerting pack members that there is an intruder and warning the intruder that they have been noticed.
- Demand Barking is the dog's way of communicating to the owner that he would like something NOW. Typical requests are "open the door NOW," "pay attention to me NOW," "let me out of here NOW," "I wanna see that dog NOW" etc.
- Spooky Barking occurs when the dog is uncomfortable about something in the environment and barks to say "I'm dangerous! Don't come any closer!"
- Boredom Barking can result when the dog's daily needs for exercise and social stimulation are not met. The dog has gone mad from boredom.

Watchdog Barking

Teach the dog a competing response – such as fetching a certain toy or doing a down-stay on a mat (which cuts barking in many dogs) for tasty food rewards. Practice out of doorbell or "intruder" contexts first and then incorporate the game or command into real-life situations. The dog will need some coaching and prompting the first few times in the real-life situation so prepare to budget some time for that. Even better, set it up with a cohort to play "visitor" a few times, so you can focus on the dog rather than being forced to attend to the person at the door.

Another effective technique is a (non-violent) penalty for barking. After a few barks, warn the dog to be quiet ("quiet please"). On the very next bark, mark the behavior ("Oh! Too bad for you!") and immediately impose a time-out penalty in a bathroom or backroom: anywhere far from the action. With repetition the dog will learn that it is his barking that is producing the removal and he will start heeding the warning.

Competing response and time-outs can be combined as a one-two punch. If he gets on his go-to-mat, he is rewarded as usual. If he barks, he goes into the penalty box.

If your dog "goes off" for the smallest sounds and changes in the environment, it would help the cause to get him better habituated. Take him out more, invite people and dogs over to socialize, expose him to a wider range of sights and sounds.

Demand Barking

When they want something, dogs will experiment with various behaviors to see if any of them work. They quickly figure out that barking works. If you don't like barking, stop rewarding it with attention, door-opening services, releasing from crates etc. Period. No buts.

Don't provide door-opening services to barking dogs. Don't let a barking dog out of a crate until he's quiet. Ignore dogs who bark at you. And so on. If you have been rewarding it for a while, the barking will get worse before it goes away. You're changing the rules and the dog will be frustrated at first. Whatever you do, don't crack and reward WORSE barking! Above all, start noticing the dog when he's quiet. Teach him that there are payoffs for lying quietly, chewing on a chew-toy and refraining from barking.

Barking When Alone

Prevention is best here. When you get a new dog or puppy, set a good precedent right away. Don't smother him with your constant presence and attention. Come and go a lot and never go to him when he's vocalizing. Wait until he's quiet for at least 30 seconds so you don't risk rewarding the barking. Tire him out before longer absences.

Dogs are a highly social species. They don't cope well with prolonged isolation. Consider daycare or a dog-walker at lunchtime if you work all day.

Increase physical and mental stimulation. In a natural environment, a lot of your dog's energy would be spent acquiring his food. Take walks, play fetch, play tug-of-war, hide & seek, and allow opportunities for free-play with other dogs. Make him work to acquire his food. Stuff it into a Kong toy and hide it in the house before you leave for work, scatter it in the grass in the backyard, or make him earn it piece by piece for tricks.

Find out what kinds of chew toys he likes and stock up. Hold chewies for him. Teach him to find a toy that you've hidden in the room and then celebrate his find with tug of war or fetch. Teach him his toys by name. Ask him to bring you one when you come home.

If your dog is anxious to the point of panic attacks, he has separation anxiety and need formal desensitization and/or medication. Contact a competent trainer or veterinary behaviorist.

Spooky Barking

In this case, it is important to get at the underlying undersocialization. Socialize puppies extensively to as wide a variety of people and dogs as possible. You cannot overdo it. Expose them to plenty of places, experiences, sights and sounds, and make it all fun with praise, games and treats. Find and attend a good puppy class.

If you missed the boat socializing your puppy, you'll have to do remedial work with your adolescent or adult. Whatever it is that your dog is spooky about must now become associated with lunch. This is how undersocialized dogs work for their food. If he doesn't like strangers, meals need to be fed bit by bit around strangers until he improves. It takes a while to improve adult dogs so persevere.

Boredom Barking

If you don't have time for a dog, don't get a dog. Dogs are not space-intensive, they are time-intensive. If you have an outside dog, train him to be an inside dog. There is no quick fix here: you must meet your dog's basic needs for stimulation, exercise and companionship.