

EXCESSIVE BARKING: WHEN AND WHY IT OCCURS

Revised Abstract from the 2006 AVSAB Annual Conference in Honolulu, Hawaii (July 2006)

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Introduction

With 61.6 million dogs living in 36.1 per cent of all households in the United States, dogs are one of the most popular pets today (Center for Information Management 2002). Unfortunately, surveys indicate that up to 86 per cent of dog owners complain that their dogs have at least one behavior problem (Campbell 1986; Adams & Clark 1989; Vacalopoulos & Anderson 1993), and in many cases the problems are serious enough to cause owners to relinquish their dogs to animal shelters. Between 25 and 30 per cent of dogs relinquished to shelters are relinquished due to behavior problems (Salman 1998; Wells & Hepper 2000).

While dogs exhibit many problematic behaviors, up to 33.4 per cent complain about excessive barking (Campbell 1986; Beaver 1994; Kobelt 2003). The extent to which barking is problematic for owners is evident in the proliferation of advice about stopping barking that is readily available through the internet and other sources, the adoption by many U.S. counties of anti-barking ordinances, and the availability of anti-bark devices such as the citronella anti-bark and electronic anti-bark collars. While many of these measures are designed to stop unwanted barking, it is increasingly recognized that barking is symptomatic of a myriad of causes such as boredom, excitement, a desire for attention, and anxiety. However, little empirical research has been conducted about the amount of barking that appears to be associated with various situations and the ways that owners perceive barking that occurs within their home environments. Therefore, the purpose of this exploratory study was to characterize the context and nature of excessive barking to better understand when barking occurs, what factors are reportedly associated with it, and owner perceptions of the behavior.

Methods

In fall 2004, a web-based questionnaire was administered to dog owners who received invitations to participate through several on-line discussion groups. These groups were primarily comprised of dog owners with an interest in dog training. The survey yielded a response rate of 1004 participants. Some questionnaires were incomplete; thus the final sample size was comprised of 996 dog owners. Approximately half of the respondents' dogs were male (49.5 percent) and female (50.5 percent) and 84.5 per cent of the dogs were spayed or neutered. Seventy-nine per cent of respondents indicated that their dogs spent more than 50 per cent of their time indoors, with 55 per cent reporting that their dogs spent between 76 and 99 per cent of their time indoors. While it is recognized that this convenience sample is not necessarily representative of the total population of dog owners, their responses offer valuable insight to how and when barking occurs, and what dog owners do about it.

Results

It is often presumed that barking that occurs while the owner is at home may differ in cause and duration from that which occurs while the owner is absent. Therefore, respondents were asked about barking when they were and were not home. Results indicate that contrary to popular opinion, much of excessive barking occurs when owners are home. Indeed, 74 per cent of respondents stated that their dogs barked excessively while they were home, while only 42.6 per cent stated that their dogs barked excessively while they were not at home. In terms of barking that occurred while the owner was at home, 76.5 per cent of respondents reported that it occurred outside, while 86 per cent indicated that it occurred inside. In both settings, new stimuli (e.g. seeing other dogs or people) and play were identified as the two primary reasons that dogs bark.

However, 48.7 per cent of respondents indicated that indoor barking also occurred as an attention-seeking behavior. Duration of attention-seeking bark bouts was reported as considerably shorter than that of stimuli-generated barking that occurred indoors (mode response was “several seconds” for attention-seeking behavior and “1-2 minutes” for stimuli-generated barking), perhaps reflecting a propensity for owners to quiet this barking by providing attention.

Because barking that impacts other people is often regarded by owners as particularly problematic, the extent to which barking at the front door was problematic was assessed. Eighty-nine percent of respondent indicated that their dogs barked “excessively” at the front door. Eighty-five per cent of the total sample of 996 respondents indicated that their dogs barked at strangers, 80.3 per cent at delivery workers, 72.7 per cent at friends, 59.4 per cent at postal workers, and 56.5 per cent at family members. Forty-eight percent of the owners found their dog’s front door barking to be “extremely” or “very” annoying, and another 36.2 per cent found the behavior to be moderately annoying. However, only 8.3 per cent of respondents reported that they can “always” stop the dog’s behavior once it begins. Perhaps not surprisingly, those who found the behavior to be most annoying were least successful in stopping it. Tactics used to stop barking at the front door included training the dog to be quiet on command (44.7 per cent), management of the situation by removing the dog or visitors (37 per cent) and corrections of various types (28.9 per cent), including those using a citronella or other bark collar (8.9 per cent). While these devices are increasingly marketed as a solution to problem barking, respondents indicated a variety of reactions (by both them and their dogs) to them. Fifty-two per cent of citronella collar users and 64.8 per cent of electronic collar users reported they were effective in the short term; Only 13.7 percent of citronella collar users and 16.6 per cent of electronic bark collar users indicated they were effective in the long-term. Numerous users commented about side effects; 22 and 40 per cent of citronella and electronic collar users, respectively, reported that their dogs experienced increased fear as a result of wearing the collars.

Of the 42.2 per cent of respondents who reported that their dogs barked excessively while they were away from home, 83 per cent reported that problem barking occurred when dogs were kept inside, and 56.6 per cent reported that it occurred when dogs were left outside. These figures contrast with the typical image of the “bored backyard barker.” Barking that occurred in the owner’s absence reportedly continued for periods of longer duration when contrasted with the duration of barking when the owner was home (27.4 per cent reported that barking sessions when

they were not at home lasted for several minutes (less than five minutes) and barking that occurred while the owner was home rarely continued for more than two minutes, regardless of the reason for the barking. For those dogs that barked excessively while their owners were away, triggers included people walking near the house (75.3 per cent), at other dogs near the house (70.7 per cent), the owner leaving (34.3 per cent), and wildlife near the house (49.8 per cent). Thus, most barking that occurs in the owner's absence appears to be triggered by external stimuli, with only a small percentage of respondents indicating boredom, separation or other anxieties as a source of barking.

Discussion

A popular image associated with barking is that of the lonely or bored dog who is confined to his yard and barks while his owner is away. However, this exploratory study indicates that the majority of excessive barking identified by owners occurs when the owner is present and in the house with the dog. While most anti-bark devices, such as electronic and citronella collars, aim to suppress barking, particularly when the owner is absent and therefore unable to control barking, these findings suggest that much nuisance barking can be addressed using positive reinforcement techniques involving the owner rewarding the dog for quiet behavior. As this study indicates, a high percentage of barking that occurs in the owners' presence is due to specific stimuli, rather than non-specific boredom. Thus, increases in exercise or enrichment alone may not be sufficient to alter barking behavior. Instead, the development of protocols to help owners understand causes of barking and educate them about ways to shape and reinforce quiet behavior may provide better long-term solutions for this widespread behavior problem.

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