

Curbing Chronic Barking

By Jennifer Nelson

When Christian Siriano, winner of the fourth season of *Project Runway*, and his partner Brad Walsh brought a Chiweenie puppy home, they showered him with attention. After a few months, Topper began to bark like crazy. "I assume he got used to the attention and when we didn't fawn over him 24/7, he got bored," says Brad.

WHY THEY BARK

Dogs bark for a variety of reasons. An attention barker like Topper begs "play with me," "pet me," "shower me with affection." Barking can also be an attempt to communicate with owners or other dogs, as in "I need to go outside" or "here I am." Some dogs bark to warn of visitors at the door, and other dogs "alert bark" in response to neighborhood sounds, such as car doors, sirens, or kids playing. Loneliness, separation issues, and fear can also trigger barking.

Certain breeds like beagles, dachshunds, terriers, and Yorkies have a reputation for being barkers. "Barking was bred into these dogs for thousands of years," says Steve Brooks, CPDT, a pet trainer who works with celebrities' dogs in Los Angeles. These days, dogs live in apartments and suburban neighborhoods, making what was once a useful trait potentially irritating and undesirable. But dogs are just doing what comes naturally.

DOGS WILL BE DOGS

Sophia Yin, DVM, MS, a veterinarian and applied animal behaviorist at San Francisco Vet Specialists, has studied excessive barking. Initially, she assumed most owners would report that their dogs were barking while they were gone. "I was surprised that so many were barking excessively in the presence of the

owners," she says. "When you're home while the behavior is occurring, there's a lot you can do."

Owners may think yelling, squirting dogs with water, or using shock collars stops barking. However, punishment rarely works when training dogs and should be avoided. "What owners really should consider is what they are doing to reward the behavior," says Dr. Yin. When we pet barking dogs to soothe them or yell "No, No, No" (which, to excited animals, may sound like "Go, Go, Go"), the behavior is being rewarded.

Here is how to make headway with a chronic barker:

Focus—Working inside your home (where there are fewer distractions), call your dog's name to get her to focus on you, then look at her and wait until she sits. Reward success with a treat. Move quickly around the room while she follows and continues to focus and sit, rewarding her each time. Once she has learned to do this, use the game to distract her from the door, from a stranger on a walk, or whenever she barks. Practice until focusing on you becomes the new behavior, and eventually reduce the treats, rewarding her only occasionally as an incentive.

Give a shout-out—If your dog barks outside, only let her out under supervision and call her in whenever she barks. Dogs learn that as soon as they woof, they come inside.

Speak on cue—Teaching dogs to bark on command can provide you with an on/off switch. Hold a treat, and have your dog sit. Wait while she tries various tactics to win the treat. When she finally makes any vocal noise, say "speak" and offer the treat. Practice until she successfully barks on cue several times in a row. Then use a similar process to introduce a quiet command. For instance, say "quiet" or "enough" every time your dog stops barking, even if it's only while she's taking a breath before her next bark.

Turn your back—Ignore attention barkers, and walk away when possible. The dog learns that barking makes you leave and that quiet brings you back.

Dogs with separation anxiety present more of a challenge. They'll need a combination of rewards for more independent behavior, such as lying calmly away from their owners, and they may need medication in addition to behavior modification. If you think your dog might have separation anxiety, ask your veterinarian for help. He or she may refer you to an applied animal behaviorist or certified dog trainer.

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Brad and Christian now ignore Topper's barking and only shower him with attention when he's quiet. Ignoring the behavior cut down on the barking. "Now," says Brad, "if only we could get him to stop peeing on everything plush." **HP**

Jennifer Nelson lives and writes in Jacksonville, Florida, with two Cocker spaniels at her feet.



More Tips for Keeping the Quiet

- **Start young, if possible.** If you expose your dog to triggering sounds when she's young and reward her for remaining calm and quiet, she will be more comfortable in these situations as she grows.
- **Be consistent.** Everyone in the household should say the same command, such as "quiet," in a calm voice. (A raised, excited voice will just encourage more barking.) Then, the dog should be ignored so no one inadvertently rewards her with more attention.
- **Be patient.** If your dog has been barking inappropriately for years, it can take weeks of repetitive training for her to learn the new behavior, so stick with it!
- **Don't be afraid to ask an expert for help.** Your veterinarian can offer personalized advice for getting barking under control.