



Enhancing the bond between dogs and their families

Barking

Question: I recently adopted a greyhound. She is quite vocal when I go to the barn to tend my horses at 0400 in the morning. Separation anxiety? I also have an abundance of wild rabbits - this gets barking and rooing from her. Shushing her and telling her to be quiet have little effect. How do I train her to be quieter?

The Trainer Answers: Barking is a natural behavior for dogs, so you should never expect to entirely eliminate barking. However, there are times when it is more appropriate than others, and there certainly can be a limit placed on barking when it does occur.

First, you should consider why your dog is barking. When you go to the barn, you question if the barking is a sign of separation anxiety. Does your dog bark every time you leave the house? Does she express other signs of anxiety when you leave? If so, then we need to address the anxiety since the barking is only a symptom of the anxiety.

If she is barking only when you go to the barn, she could be expressing frustration at not being able to do what she wants. Surely, she is missing out on an exciting adventure! If this is the case, frustration intolerance and impulse control exercises would be very beneficial. An example of these exercises would include down-stays to earn meals, walks, and other things that interest her. She learns that sometimes she can earn the things she wants by being patient and waiting rather than barking and demanding to join you or get something. Barking is never successful in getting what she wants, so we need to teach her what will be successful. However, she also needs to learn that sometimes she will not get what she wants, and she will need to learn to deal with frustration and disappointment. That's life!

In regard to the bunnies, is she frustrated about not being able to chase the bunnies? Is she barking out of the pure excitement and arousal in seeing the bunnies? Probably both. Bunnies are a huge distraction for most dogs. You can work toward training her to never bark at the bunnies, or you can limit the barking. Let's say we decide she gets 2 seconds of barking and then she needs to stop.

Begin your training far away from the bunnies. Her arousal level is most likely far too high around the bunnies right now. If her arousal level is too high, she very likely might not even be able to hear you. Ever tried to get someone's attention while they're watching an exciting play during the Super Bowl? Begin your work in the house with no distractions. Very gradually work up in your degree of distractions. Most people try to move too quickly which leads to failure - that's failure on our part. We've asked too much of our dog too soon.

The key to the bunny issue is teaching your dog to turn her focus away from whatever she is focused on, and give her a different job to do - such as focus on you. I break this into a couple of steps. First, I work on a "watch me" or "look" cue to teach the dog to focus on me. If I want her to take focus away from something else, I will need to give her something new to focus on. Once I have the dog's focus on me, then I can give her a different job to do, such as walk away or lie down. The key is to keep her focused on something other than the bunnies.

Secondly, when she does bark, give her your time limit and then say, "Enough" or some other cue. Have something REALLY tasty used only for this exercise, such as chicken or roast beef. Place it right up to her nose as you say your cue, and feed as soon as she stops barking. Work toward combining this with your focus exercise, so once she stops barking, you immediately give her something else to focus on and do to take her mind off the bunnies.

