

# Hello? Anybody Out There?

## "HOME ALONE" BARKING

Within moments of Robin's departure for work, Ruffles, her scruffy terrier mix, issues his usual succession of short, sharp, assertive barks, consistently apprising Robin's neighbors of her comings and goings. The co-op board is considering eviction. Robin is at wits' end.

### Why All the Noise?

Dogs who bark when left alone fit several profiles. Separation anxiety sufferers are tightly bonded to their guardians and act as though their world has ended when they are apart. These dogs may also eliminate around the home, frantically chew on human possessions, and dig, chew, or propel themselves through doors or windows. To learn more about separation anxiety, refer to "Don't Leave Me This Way" ([www.aspc.com/companionlines](http://www.aspc.com/companionlines)).

Some breeds (including most terriers) are born watchdogs, prone to sounding the alarm whenever a noise or movement catches their attention. Elimination of this tendency is unlikely in those born to bark; instead, they must be taught to limit their alerts to five or six barks and then settle down. Confining these "reactive barkers" to a dark, quiet part of the home when you are away promotes sleep instead of constant arousal.

Youngsters of any breed can be vocally challenging, unless exercised to the point of exhaustion. Try waking up early to ensure an hour of romping at the local dog park, throwing a ball until your arm is limp, or dropping Bowser off at doggie day care when morning exercise needs can't be met.

Finally, there is the barker—like Ruffles—who seems intent on calling the family pack back together. Once family members leave the house, the fun stops. So he offers a vocal locator signal to draw them home. If they return while he's barking, his efforts are rewarded.

### Breaking the Cycle

If owner-absent barkers declare victory every time a family member returns—even if only to holler for quiet—how can this vicious cycle be broken? Start with exercises that reward the dog for being silent. On a day free of work commitments, go through your normal morning routine, but don't stray far from the door once you've left home. If your dog is silent for a predetermined period of time, reenter and reward him. Begin with an easily obtainable goal—say, 10 to 30 seconds. When he barks, set the timer back to zero. It may take awhile to get that first silent success. Some dogs will improve faster when a

marker indicates unwanted behavior; a sharp rap on the door with a metal object after a bark may speed things along. No shouting for quiet, though—most dogs prefer negative attention to none at all and may find your hollering rewarding.

Once you have garnered your first success, reenter the home, tell the dog "yes" or "good," reward him, and go about your business. Keep all comings and goings low-key so he isn't excessively revved up each time. Repeat the exercise numerous times, lengthening the time away with each success. If you have to restart the count more than a couple of times, you may be moving too far, too fast.

Some dogs will get wise to your presence on the other side of the door. Increase your distance after the first few repetitions to replicate departure. Instead of rapping to mark the unwanted behavior, you could employ a citronella-dispensing collar. This device interrupts each bark with a multisensory cue by combining the startling *psst* of the mist exploding out of the container, the moist sensation, and the citronella smell. In a 1996 *Journal of the American Animal Hospital Association* article, Cornell University behaviorists Juarbe-Diaz and Houpt note that the citronella collar is twice as effective (88.9 compared to 44.4 percent) as the electronic shock collar, without the use of a painful stimulus. Some find that the use of the collar alone extinguishes barking proclivities. However, it is not suitable for separation anxiety cases, as these often demand a more extensive behavior modification protocol and possibly drug therapy as well.

No matter what the reason for your dog's home-alone barking, please let your neighbors know that you are working on the matter. Their irritation will lessen once they know that their complaints haven't fallen on deaf ears.



Jacque Lynn Schultz, CPDT  
ASPCA Companion Animal Programs Adviser  
National Shelter Outreach