



Peninsula Humane Society & SPCA

Troubleshooting

Cause

Dogs often go beserk and become uncontrollable when specific things happen -- when someone comes to the door, when you come home, when visitors come over, when children walk by the fence, when a neighbor's cat or dog passes by your house, yard, or even the car. Dogs will bark, jump, lunge, madly dash around, growl, and even urinate when excited.

The key to eliminating this behavior is to convince the dog that the events that set her off are really not exciting at all.

Many times this behavior was accidentally taught to the dog. When she jumped up, she was rewarded with a pat and attention. When she barked or acted territorial, you might have said, "Oh, Alice, it's okay, there's nothing to be excited about, now you be a good girl." The dog didn't understand your words, but she did know that she was getting positive and rewarding attention, so she thought she must be doing the right thing. If you shout and get excited, she might think you're encouraging her by joining in on the excitement and barking too!

Treatment

The first step in stopping this type of behavior is to stop reinforcing it. The next step is to isolate whatever sets the dog off and repeat it over and over again until she is totally bored by it.

For example: if the dog goes bonkers every time your neighbor's son walks by the fence, ask your neighbor's son if he'd like to earn a few dollars by spending a Saturday morning, helping you to train your dog. All he has to do is keep walking by your fence over and over. At first, Alice will charge and bark as usual, and you may think she'll never stop. After the boy has passed by the fence over and over (may 10 or 20 times, maybe 100 or 200 times, depending on the dog), Alice will eventually lose interest. If she looks up at all, she'll probably just think, "Oh, you again." At that miraculous moment, praise her extravagantly and hand her a t-bone steak, medium-rare with all the trimmings. Make it abundantly clear to her that this calm, blasé attitude is your definition of good behavior.

Keep in mind how many weeks, months, or years she's been doing this, and don't expect the problem to disappear in an hour. You must devote some time and patient to solving this problem.

For more info, call our free Behavior Helpline (650/340-7022 x783 or, for Spanish, x786) or consider a low-cost consultation. To make a consultation appointment, call 650/340-7022 x667. The PHS/SPCA Behavior Department, like many shelter programs, is funded by donations.