Excessive barking is one of the most common behavioural problems seen in modern dogs. It is also the behavioural problem that most dog owners seem to have the greatest difficulty in curing. However, there are simple and effective solutions to the barking problem, whether the problem be that of an excessively vocal young pup on its first few nights in a new home or the penetrating yap of a faithful family hound left alone while the owners are at work.

**Attention Seeking Behaviour**

In many cases the barking is a form of attention seeking behaviour. For instance, the bark of a little puppy cast alone into the back garden is a cry for attention and so too is the incessant barking of a family dog left alone when the owners are away. This attention seeking behaviour can be difficult to cure unless proper techniques are used. For example, if an owner scolds a puppy every time it barks, the owner is actually answering the pup’s request for attention. It does not really matter to the pup that the attention it is receiving is not very pleasant – it’s attention all the same. It is the same with adult dogs. Hitting a dog with a rolled newspaper when it barks also gives the dog the attention it was seeking. Thus the dog learns that the more it barks, the more attention it will receive even though the attention is not pleasurable. However, the unpleasantness of scolding will also increase the dog’s anxiety, and this in turn will increase the need for the dog to seek attention, thereby increasing the need to bark. To make matters worse you cannot solve the problem by going to the pooch and trying to comfort it as this is again giving the dog exactly what it wants – attention. This will reinforce the barking problem and will teach the dog or pup to bark even more to receive additional attention. So what’s the answer?

**Bad Dog – Good Dog Technique**

The answer is to use the BAD DOG – GOOD DOG technique. This is really just a special way of using discipline, but in its most effective and gentle form. For puppies, it works like this. Lock the pup in a comfortable room or pen. When it barks creep down to the closed door and shout sternly through the door ‘QUIET’. Do not open the door. The pup will usually stop barking at the sound of your voice. Wait for 15 to 20 seconds and if the pup does not bark, then open the door and praise and cuddle the pup as if it were the best pup in the world. The praise the puppy receives is not a reward for barking, but a reward for being quiet as a result of the command that you gave it. Thus, the pup gets the attention it wanted, but for being quiet and not noisy. Much the same techniques work for adult dogs too. Take the situation in which the dog is barking excessively in your garden. The correct approach to this problem starts with carefully timed discipline. The discipline should come as near as possible to the moment at which the dog gets the idea to bark, which is usually several seconds before the dog actually barks. A dog owner can usually tell when their dog is going to bark just by observing the dog’s behaviour. A firm ‘NO, BAD DOG!’ will generally influence the dog to decide not to bark. The dog’s attention will then be on its owner rather than the object at which it was going to bark. The owner should then use the dog’s attention to advantage and call the dog with the command ‘COME’. Once the dog has responded, it should be given a further command to ‘SIT’ then ‘STAY’. If the dog also obeys these commands it should be praised liberally.

The advantage of such a technique is that the dog is not reprimanded, but it is also removed from the area in which it was barking so the behaviour cannot recommence. In addition, if the origin of the bark was the need for attention from the owner then this attention is provided to
the dog, but only as a reward for ‘COMING’ and ‘STAYING’, not for barking. 
The praise also dispels any anxiety and results in a happy, smiling, quiet pooch.

WHAT DO YOU DO IF YOU ARE NOT AT HOME WHEN YOUR DOG BARKS?

The Denning Principle

The above techniques are very useful and effective, but they are worthless if the dog barks when the owners are away at work.

There is a solution to this problem too. Barking in such situations is usually due to a combination of social isolation and boredom. Dogs are by nature a pack animal and they hold the leader of the pack in high esteem. The leader of the pooch’s pack is generally the owner. When separated from its owner the pooch becomes anxious and bored, and this leads to barking as a form of attention seeking and/or boredom relief.

The correct situation is to make the dog happy, tranquil and relaxed by locking it in a small comfortable den. The denning principle is very effective because the den simulates the natural places in which a wild pack dog would sleep, such as a hollowed log or a cave in an embankment. To make a den you can use a bathroom or laundry, or construct a small room measuring about two metres by three metres, under a house.

Making the dog happy when confined is easily achieved. Firstly, make the den comfortable with soft bedding. It must also be of a comfortable temperature and certainly not in the blazing sun. In addition, the dog’s water bowl should be placed inside the den and nowhere else so that when the dog is free in the garden (when you are at home) it has to go into the den voluntarily to get a drink.

However, the most important element of this procedure is to lock the dog inside the den for 15 minutes, whenever you feed it. Dogs love food and adore being fed. When you feed your hungry hound he will be happy. But, you can make the dog even happier by acting the fool, by jumping up and down on the spot as you are preparing the dog’s dinner, by speaking in an exciting voice to the pooch and by turning somersaults in front of the dog as you take him into the den.

If you do this, the dog will also be jumping up and down and turning somersaults with the joy of being fed. Once you are in the den, regain control by commanding the dog to ‘SIT’ and ‘STAY’ and then place the food on the ground. Do not allow the dog to move for a few seconds, and when you are ready, give the dog a specific command to eat his food (for example, ‘TUCKER Rover’).

Once the dog is gobbling the food, leave and lock the dog in the den for 15 minutes. Return once the period is over, release the dog from the den and praise the dog for being such a good dog.

With this slightly insane approach the dog will be very happy about being locked in the den because he will associate being confined with being fed. The next step occurs when you leave for work. When you do, lock the dog in the den and give it a scrumptious food reward to induce happiness. A large bone works well for this purpose as the bone will last for some time and will keep the dog happily amused.

The dog will remember the happiness it associates with being fed and being confined at the same time and is sure to remain quiet and very happy.