

## TALES FROM A DOG BEHAVIOURIST:

### City Living

With more and more people opting to live in complexes and flats these days, it's becoming common to hear about the problems associated with having an animal in a small space. The most common complaint is that animals disturb neighbours, and the usual culprit is the barking dog. A lot of people just decide against having an animal because of the potential problems that may be experienced, but living without an animal is not living at all! There are ways to have a dog in your small home and to live in harmony with your neighbours.

I've worked with many dogs in complexes, and there are a some problems that people commonly experience with their dogs in this situation. I'll discuss each in turn, the reason for it and possible solutions.

1. -Excessive barking. This is not a problem isolated to dogs in complexes, but as people live so close to each other in complexes, it can upset a lot of people (in my experience, to the point that neighbours threaten legal action).

-Dogs bark excessively for a number of reasons – separation anxiety, frustration, limited space, boredom. Also, in complexes, dogs can often hear and see many people walking past their home, cars come and go often, staff walk around, other dogs barking in the complex, cats jumping on walls and teasing the dog etc. Basically, complexes can be busy places and there are a lot more stimuli to excite a dog in a complex than in a suburban home.

-The solution to excessive barking is similar for each problem. What I usually ask people to do is walk their dog in the morning before they leave for work. This drains some energy and gives the dog something to think about (something other than what's going in the complex). The longer the walk the better, but even a 10 minute walk will suffice. The dog should then have breakfast – walking followed by food encourages dogs to relax. Then the dog can be given a rawhide bone or the owner can hide treats in the garden; some sort of treat so that the dog associates the owner leaving with something good, and they are also kept busy for a little while.

Upon returning home, owners should ignore their dog completely until they have calmed down (about 10 minutes) before greeting them. Giving an excited greeting straight away can

reinforce any anxiety that the dog may have felt while the owner was away. It is then a good idea to walk the dog again, especially if their behaviour is related to boredom or frustration.

Another idea is to ask a neighbour or friend to visit the dog during the day and perhaps have a quick game with them or take them for a short walk.

Another problem I've come across is neighbours talking to dogs or giving them affection through a gate, which can also cause excitement and barking. It may not be easy to tell neighbours to stop doing this, but a sign on the gate saying 'Please ignore the dog' or something like that will help. I've also had experience of irate neighbours coming out of their homes to tell the dog to 'Shut up'. This of course will only increase excitement, frustration and anxiety. The solution may be to speak to the neighbour and tell them that the problem is being worked on and to please not interfere. Some people get so angry though that it may be necessary to approach the body corporate of the complex and ask them to speak to the person.

2. -Destruction. Again, this is common in all types of homes, but may be more problematic in a complex because homes are usually smaller.

-Dogs become destructive for reasons similar to those for excessive barking – frustration, boredom, anxiety.

-Solutions are also quite similar – draining energy through walks, providing toys or things to chew on. In addition, products such as Avert (bad taste) and Foolsack (bad smell) can be sprayed on or around the objects that the dog targets for destruction to deter them from those objects. It is also important that people do not overreact when they come home and find that their dog has destroyed something. Should a person shout at their dog, 'show' them what they've done or just generally freak out, the dog will either become more anxious (which can result in further destruction) or they will consider the reaction to be attention (negative attention is still attention) which will encourage them to repeat the behaviour in order to get more attention. People should completely ignore whatever their dog has done, and fix it when the dog is not looking so that the dog does not become even more interested in the object. If, for example, a dog digs holes or pulls plants out, fix what they've done but then spray the object with one of the aforementioned products. Dogs are likely to return to an area that smells like their owner, so using one of these products will dilute the smell.

Owners should also teach their dogs early on what is and is not acceptable to chew on. When a dog/pup chews on something unacceptable, they should be told 'No' firmly and then given

something that they can chew on, like a toy. If a better option is not provided, the dog will keep trying different objects – rather show them what they can destroy!

3. –Dogs kept inside apartments can be difficult to house-train.

-This is partly because they cannot be taught to go outside to pee/poo because outside may be down a lift or staircase. Also, dogs are sensitive to the surface that they eliminate on. If they become accustomed to peeing on tiles, they may not want to pee on grass. If the owner works, they cannot be home all the time to take their dog outside.

-The way to solve this problem is to set a stable foundation – a regular eating routine so that the dog eliminates at regular times. So no food left for them to snack on during the day! Secondly, take the dog outside before leaving for work so that they can do their business, and then immediately take them outside again upon arriving home. This may have to be done again before bed time. If the owner has a domestic worker, they can help by taking the dog outside at intervals during the day. A neighbour that stays home or works from home could also be asked to help by taking the dog out.

The dog should be provided with an area in the apartment where they can eliminate – this will require the use of training aids such as puppy pads (I have even seen puppy pads designed to look and feel like grass, but they're imports and very expensive). As with all house-training, the dog should be rewarded for eliminating in the right area and ignored when they use the wrong area (shouting at a dog or punishing them for using the wrong area is simply awful – they may develop anxiety/stress problems associated with eliminating, which can lead to even worse problems). Eliminations should be cleaned up with a biological detergent that will completely break down the smell (as dogs are attracted to use areas that they have 'marked'). The Simple Solution range of products has a great detergent, and many other products that are fantastic for successful house-training.

In summary, the most common problems I deal with in complexes are excessive barking, destruction and poor house-training.

The best things owners can do if they live in a complex/apartment are:

-Walk the dog regularly, if possible, twice a day.

-Ignore the dog when returning home and if they have done something unacceptable while you were away (destruction or elimination). You cannot discipline a dog after the event – it simply doesn't work, and may cause further behavioural problems.

-Set aside affection and playing time when you are home. This will help to prevent boredom and stress.

-Provide toys or safe chews (like rawhide) to keep the dog busy during the day. Another idea is to hide treats/toys in the garden for the dog to find.

-Rotate the dog's toys and give them a different one each day so that they don't become bored of their toys.

-Should an owner work very long hours and not have anyone that can help them, they should consider hiring a dog walker.

-Ask neighbours for assistance; whether it be ignoring the dog, providing them with company (walks, games, taking them outside), or just understanding that a problem is being dealt with.

-Make sure eating is routine, twice a day is best. This will result in regular elimination patterns, but also provides security in that dogs know exactly when they will be fed.

-Choose a dog to match your lifestyle and home. A Border Collie in a complex is not a good idea, and neither are vocal dogs such as Bassett Hounds. Don't think that just because a dog is small, they will be suited to complex/apartment living; for example, a Jack Russell may be small, but they are very big when it comes to energy, excitement and barking! Speak to breeders or staff at rescue shelters about getting a low energy, placid and quiet dog – do your research well and you may avoid a lot of problems. Should any problems arise, try the given resolutions and should they be ineffective, contact a behaviourist for more help.

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