



Barking, Aggression and Destruction by the Bored Dog

Introduction

Boredom is one of the most common factors predisposing dogs to behaviour problems. The typical suburban pet dog doesn't work, is not allowed to roam and spends long periods by itself. The ways it adapts to this vary with temperament and opportunities for action and some dogs will turn "B.A.D." - bark, be aggressive or destructive. There are other causes for this, but boredom is very often the most likely. Other behaviours resulting from boredom are digging, pulling on the lead, compulsive licking, pulling washing off the line, mounting people's legs, coprophagy, eating other unusual items, and stereotypes, for example tail-chasing and repeatedly running around the back yard in a set pattern. Boredom is caused by the dog's environment not giving enough stimulus for the dog to feel comfortable, and one theory says that this gives rise to arousal of the dog and greater excitability. This can lead to B.A.D. behaviour, in the worst case without any external stimulus at all. Another theory states that many of these behaviours are a result of frustration of natural behaviours such as foraging, feeding and general exploration.

Factors influencing boredom

- **Age** From 3 months to 3 years dogs have higher stimulus needs than at other times.
- **Breed** Excitability and general activity have been good indicators of predisposition to boredom. Breeds with these indicators include Cocker Spaniel, Irish Setters, Maltese, Poodles, Dachshund, Fox Terrier, Cairn, Scottish, Airedale and Silky Terriers. Australian working dogs like the Heeler, Kelpie and Border Collies will also get bored if not worked.
- **Work** Daily working dogs like stock dogs, guide dogs, police dogs, or dogs with daily obedience-training will not normally show signs of boredom.
- **Friends** Dogs with other dogs as companions are generally happier and less bored.
- **Learning** Dogs can be trained to be quiet in certain places, like their bed
- **Denning** Many dogs will lie quietly in a small, dark, quiet area which has the features of a nest.
- **Energy** Dogs which are fatigued, have recently eaten or have chronic pain are less likely to show signs of boredom.

Solutions

- **Obedience Work** The two main benefits of obedience work are that it gives the dog "work therapy" and it brings them under better control. For instance, when they are trained, they are more likely to respond to a "No!" to excessive barking.
- **"Walkies"** At least once a day, preferably twice, provide free-running (off lead) exercise outside of your property. This provides enough stimulation for dogs to help satisfy them. Play sessions with other dogs and with people are a good idea, too.
- **Toys** Ice cream containers (the dogs' footy), suspended thick ropes or tyres, and other toys are good for keeping a dog occupied when it is on its own.
- **A view** Some dogs will be content to watch the world pass by whilst watching from a comfortable position, so you may want to experiment with open fencing, or enlarging the dog's enclosure to include a view. On the other hand, a quiet den may give a dog an opportunity to settle down.
- **Chewies** Most dogs, especially puppies, like to chew. Whole, **uncooked** marrow bones are good
- **Sedatives/tranquillisers** The side-effects of drug treatment should always be considered and discussed with your vet. These may be necessary as a short-term solution while other remedies are being put in place. Phenobarbitone is usually well tolerated by healthy dogs. Acepromazine works well for many dogs, has been known to excite a small number. Progestins tend to make animals calmer, and so reduce signs of boredom.
- **Castration** Some owners have said that it worked for their dogs, others have reported no change.
- **Stimulants** Curiously, many "hyperactive" dogs quieten down when given amphetamines. Maybe they receive sufficient "internal" stimulation from the drug for them to feel comfortable again.

Conclusion

There are many factors which influence a dog's internal state of boredom. Each dog has a different need for stimuli. It attempts to adapt to a deficiency in ways which are often unacceptable to owners and neighbours. The domestic dog can be expected to cause problems unless it receives sufficient stimuli to replace that which it would receive in the wild.

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