

The American Shetland Sheepdog Association's Official Position on the Practice of Debarking

The American Shetland Sheepdog Association (ASSA) supports the rights of owners and veterinarians to choose debarking as a management tool that will allow dogs to remain in their homes, and will give breeders of noisy breeds the flexibility to develop viable breeding programs. Additionally, the ASSA would like to emphasize that body language, not vocalization, is the primary mode of communication for the canine species.

The ASSA recognizes that owners have to juggle difficult decisions regarding the care of their animals and their responsibility to their neighbors and the community at large. Ultimately, it is in the best interest of an incessant barker to have its bark softened rather than for a beloved family pet to be relinquished to a shelter or euthanized due to non-compliance with local noise ordinances or disputes with neighbors. Breeders use this tool as part of being responsible dog owners and breeders.

Debarking of dogs is a commonly misunderstood practice. The surgery that reduces the barking noise is more properly called "bark softening" as the dog is still able to "bark" following this procedure, but at a reduced volume. When performed by a skilled veterinarian, bark softening is an acceptable medical procedure. For many responsible dog owners, bark softening is the only alternative to euthanizing or surrendering their canine companion to a local shelter when their pet's noisy behavior continually disturbs the community. Bark softening surgery limits the volume but not the amount of the barking. Bark softened dogs can still broadcast the approach of strangers, express their glee when family members come home, and announce their presence at the local dog park. They also get to stay in their homes even if they are persistent barkers. Many people who are opposed to this practice feel it limits a dog's ability to communicate. While barking may be one way dogs communicate with their human owners, body language remains the primary means of communication. The decision to bark soften a dog is one that is best left to the dog owner and his/her veterinarian.

The ASSA opposes bans on bark softening because they:

1. Jeopardize an owner's ability to keep a beloved pet.
2. Have the potential to place additional burdens on local shelters and rescues
3. Legitimize activist campaigns to restrict the rights of animal owners
4. Inject politics into practices that should remain the right and responsibility of animal owners and the medical professionals they consult.

The ASSA supports the rights of owners and veterinarians to choose bark softening and urges veterinary schools to train veterinarians in the latest techniques in bark softening so they can continue to provide this valuable service to their clients' dogs.