

What is a Growl?

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Growling is one of the biggest behavior issues I get calls for. People want to know how to stop this aggressive behavior. But often, the conversation I have with them does NOT go the way they expect when I tell them they have a good dog who's doing his very best to NOT be aggressive.

First of all, true aggression in dogs is rare. Most dog bites are defensive or accidental, not aggressive, and can be avoided if the person being bitten had more knowledge of, or was more aware of the dog's body language in that situation. Dogs also growl in many different situations. Many dogs growl when they play to pretend that they are fierce just like little kids run around yelling and roaring with their toy swords. Or they growl as an alert. Or to communicate a need.

Even if the growl isn't happening during play, it's important to understand that growling is a GOOD thing. Your dog is trying to communicate. To tell you, or the target of the growl, that he's uncomfortable with the situation and would like it to stop. Growling is how dogs AVOID physical conflict. Dogs are living creatures and their comfort and space should be respected, just like we want our comfort and space to be. Listen to your dog's growling, don't just ignore it or tell him to get over it, and remedy the situation. Make sure that the kid isn't grabbing his face or paws, take him out of the chaotic party, keep your other dog from bothering him while he's enjoying a bone or his dinner. A dog growling at you or another dog trying to take his bone from him is just saying "hey, I am chewing on this, I don't want you to take it from me." I wouldn't want someone coming up and just grabbing my chocolate bar. I would probably say "Hey man, that's mine, wtf!?"

NEVER punish a growl! When you punish a growl, you are punishing that communication. You aren't making the situation less uncomfortable for the dog (in fact, you are doing the opposite and likely to make him MORE uncomfortable). All he will learn when you punish him for growling is that he shouldn't growl. This leads to a dog that doesn't warn people he is uncomfortable, which means that his

discomfort can go over his threshold without you knowing and he may escalate to defending himself with his teeth. Punishing a growl leads to a dog that becomes unpredictable; a dog that escalates to a bite without warning because he has learned that his warnings go either unheeded or he gets punished for them is a dog that is very hard to rehabilitate and manage.

In fact, I actually PRAISE my dogs for growling! I thank them for telling me that they're uncomfortable so that I can immediately take steps to help him, either by removing him from the situation so he can have more space, or by offering reassurance and positive things to make the situation more comfortable.

If your dog growls because he is uncomfortable, you CAN train the dog to be more comfortable in those situations so that he doesn't feel the need to growl. You can train a dog to tolerate handling by kids, to tolerate another dog taking his stuff, to tolerate visitors to the home. Your dog is also likely to be more comfortable in those situations if he knows you have his back and are going to be there to help him out if he gets nervous. It just takes time, and a little understanding, trust, and the openness to letting your dog communicate with you!