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Your Smart Dog

The Language of Growls

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Growling is a normal form of doggie communication. Growling, along with body language and other vocalizations, gives us a view into the doggie psyche, into what's going on in a dog's brain. This month we're going to dissect a growl – what does it mean, what should you do?

What is A Growl?

Dogs can't use words to communicate, so they rely on body language and vocalizations (growls, barks, and whines, to name a few) to "have conversations." Dogs converse with other dogs, as well as with people with these vocalizations. **To really understand your dog, you have to know what growling does – and does not – mean.**

Dogs don't have words – they can use only their body language and vocalizations to communicate their message.

Why Do Dogs Growl?

Not all growls are created equal. To decipher the meaning of a growl, we need to find out why the dog is growling. There are many reasons dogs growl – when playing, dreaming, protecting something of value, if they feel threatened, or scared.

What Does A Growl Mean?

Dog-to-Dog Growls

As mentioned earlier, it's important to take into consideration the context in which your dog is growling. Remember, **dogs don't have words. They can only use their body language and vocalizations to communicate with**

their dog friends. Growling is one way dogs communicate with one another.

Sometimes dogs growl when they are playing happily with another dog-friend. Wondering **how to tell the difference between a serious and a playful growl?** Take a look at the dog's bodies. Do you see the following?

- "Loose" bodies (not rigid and stiff)
- Mutual playing (both dogs are content to play together, neither one looks scared or threatened)
- Willingness to continue playing together (if one gets the chance to leave, does he?)
- Cooperative play (dogs take turns "winning" or pinning each other)

If you see these things, the dogs are most likely engaging in normal dog-play. If either dog looks scared, looks like they are bullying the other dog, or moves stiffly, it's time to interrupt play-time and let them settle down before allowing them to play again.

Dogs also growl to communicate their uneasiness. Your dog may growl at another dog if that dog is:

- Unfamiliar
- Too close to a valued object
- Behaving inappropriately (jumping on your dog, for instance)
- Crowding your dog's space

Dog-to-Human Growls

Much like dog-to-dog growling, dogs have different reasons for growling at humans. Some dogs growl playfully when interacting with humans. Other dogs growl at children, or men with hats, or some other elusive reason. Again,



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look at the context in which the growling happens – what does the dog’s body language tell you? Is he stiff or floppy?

What NOT To Do If Your Dog Growls

Knowing there are different reasons behind your dogs’ growls, it’s important to pay attention to the situation before deciding what to do with a growl. If the growl is playful, you probably don’t have to do anything about it, unless the growling bothers you.

If you think the growl is more serious, it’s important to proceed with caution.

A growl is a good, clear warning signal and one that we should heed. The dog is clearly telling us that he’s not comfortable with the situation. The most important thing to note is that a **growl is information. Punishing the dog for growling will not fix the problem.** Punishing a growl will only take that form of communication away from your dog. The next time your dog is in the same situation, he will try a different form of communication – this time he may snarl or even snap. If you punish this form of communication, you’ll have a dog that bites without warning.

Forcing your dog to tolerate a situation that makes him uncomfortable is a recipe for disaster.

By doing this, you are giving the dog no option to get out of the situation. If, for example, your dog is uncomfortable around small children and you hold your dog’s collar while allowing children to approach your dog, you aren’t helping alleviate your dog’s discomfort. You are actually contributing to the discomfort which could lead to a snarl, snap, or a bite.

What to Do If Your Dog Growls

Your first order of business is to determine what makes your dog uncomfortable in the situation. Is it the presence of small children surrounding him, another dog near a prized

possession? Is he scared? Does he feel threatened? Once you know *why* your dog is uncomfortable, you can then do something about hearing his “call of distress” and do something to help him.

Here are some basic steps to follow. Please note that if you are afraid that your dog will bite, **consult a professional positive reinforcement dog trainer and do not proceed with the following steps.**

In this example let’s assume the dog is growling when you approach his food bowl.

1. Begin to hand feed your dog his meals. No more food in the bowl. If there isn’t food in the bowl, he’s much less likely to “guard” the bowl. *Bonus: And it’s **you** that gives the dog the food. Therefore **you** become an important and welcome link to the food.*
2. After your dog is eagerly accepting his food from your hand, begin to re-introduce the food bowl. Put the food bowl in your lap and drop three or four pieces of your dog’s food in the bowl. When he finishes those kibbles, drop three or four more in. Continue this until the dog’s entire meal has been eaten.
3. Once your dog is looking forward to your hand moving to his empty bowl to add more food, reserve an extra special treat (chicken, steak, fish – something REALLY delicious that he doesn’t normally get). Put five to ten pieces of food in his bowl and while he’s eating, drop in this delicious morsel. Your dog is learning that really good things happen when your hand moves toward his bowl.
4. If your dog readily accepts your hand approaching his bowl when he has a few kibbles in it, begin putting more kibble



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in his bowl and then adding a delicious morsel every few moments.

Note: This process could take days, weeks, or months depending on your dog. Don't rush these steps. If you are afraid that your dog will bite, DO NOT engage in this process. Find a professional positive reinforcement dog trainer.

A growl is a good, clear warning signal. Punish it and you'll have a dog that bites without warning.

By following these steps, you are solving the underlying problem (the dog's dislike of approaching people) instead of just getting rid of his warning system. If, instead of implementing the steps above, you punished your dog for growling (by yelling or swatting at him, or taking his food bowl away), you are doing two things: (1) reinforcing his belief that people who approach his food bowl are dangerous and (2) getting rid of a perfectly good warning system. You are not, I repeat NOT, fixing the underlying problem.

Dogs can't use words. It is up to each of us to listen to our dogs and try our best to decipher their language. Not all growls are created equal – know your dog. We expect dogs to listen to us, isn't it time we start listening to them?

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