

Growling is one the most misunderstood dog communications. We all know that dogs need to dig, chew, chase, eat, pee, poop and bark. It's their nature. They'll blow up if they don't! Growling is very much a part of their nature as well.

Growling is an ambiguous behavior. It isn't always clear what our dogs are telling us when they growl. Most dog owners don't know!

### WHY DO DOGS GROWL?

Dogs growl because they can and it is their way of communicating (fear, warning, playing). They growl for various reasons:

- Reacting to a threat
- Scared / Frustrated
- Fear / Lack of Confidence
- Lack of Socialization
- Learned Helplessness
- Playing
- Lack of supervision when playing rough games (usually with children)

Growling is divided into three levels:

- Play
- Fear-Based
- Warning prior to an aggressive and/or defensive behavior (stay away)

When integrated with the dog's other behaviors and body language, growling communicates his intentions and how she feels. Think of us in the morning before our first cup of coffee. We become aware of each other's relative state of being.

We know from experience to stay away from George (or Gracie) until they've had their coffee by watching, listening and past experience (they bit our head off). Dogs observe this whole picture too, and quickly. Dogs have an added advantage with their keen sense of smell and a wide angled lens (peripheral vision) working for them.

### LOOK AT THE BIG PICTURE *What to do if your Dog is Growling*

First, try to determine what he is growling about. Is it play with other dogs? What's the tail doing? Is it high or low? Wagging? How fast? What are the ears doing? Are they pricked up or laid back? Where was the dog; inside, outside, in another room, at the park? Has this happened before?

Are children involved in the interactions? Were you supervising? How many times, where, when, with whom—and what did you do? What were the results? Journal this information as it is vital for future reference, particularly if growling is something you are trying to understand and/or it is deleterious in your relationship with your dog.

Safety is always first especially when children (and other pets) are involved. Immediately defuse the situation by redirecting to a calmer behavior. Yelling will make it worse.

***You can learn more in Awareness Centered Training—ACT available at all major booksellers in e-book and soft cover.***

### ***What NOT to do***

Do not giggle at barking dogs. This reinforces (shapes) the barking. Do not yell, but DO redirect away from the stimulus (what is the dog barking at). If dogs have been cooped up for hours, let them unwind before having them interact (while you supervise) with children. Train the dog and teach them when to relax and bark. Seek the help of a behaviorist or good dog trainer.

- Change the subject (redirecting them to an appropriate behavior. Call them to you and have them "sit").
- Go to them and calmly hook the leash up and walk away.
- Walk them for awhile. If necessary, contact a behaviorist or trainer to guide you.

- Put growling on cue ... I'm not kidding, it's powerful, teaching the dog to growl, then shush, down.

**Remain neutral:** If you can get control back, then you're OK. Chances are the dog has stopped growling! Try to figure out what's bothering the dog; what or who is involved, change it and use preventive measures so it won't happen again.

### KINDS OF GROWLING

**First Level—PLAY:** Play growling manifests itself during roughhousing, such as wrestling, puppy play or tug-of-war. Note that these behaviors are not species-exclusive: i.e. they can occur dog-to-dog or dog-to-people. These growls express pleasure and are not a matter for concern. Care must be taken to ensure that the play remains **grounded**, and doesn't escalate into one of the next two levels. Grounded refers to keeping the play under control by periodically throwing in a request for a behavior like, "come, sit or down" and then release with a "GO Play". This drives home the difference between **start, stop, play & relax. As with any sport or game, dogs need to be taught boundaries. Otherwise, they create their own.**

**Second level—FEAR:** It is the dog's attempt to tell another creature "**back off**, you're making me nervous and scared." Usually, fearful growling starts fairly late in the "back off" game. There should be ample body language warnings that the dog is uncomfortable before growling (eyes diverted, tail tucked, looking uncertain, eyes bug-ging out, excessive yawning, backing off, lip licking, head turning, freezing).

*The exception to this rule is the situation of **learned helplessness** where the dog wants the owner to stop an activity and learns he can accomplish that by growling. How do we get around this? Change the subject! Take back control of the situation. It will be a relief to both you and your dog. Teach the difference between playing and relaxing.*  
Read Maureen's article [Mine, Yours, Ours](#).

*"Mine, All Mine!"*

**Third Level—  
Aggression/Defense  
Attack:**



For the most part, *the growliest dogs are not the top ranking dog*, but rather middle-ranking types. Most dogs are, in fact, middle-ranking, blustering wannabe pack leaders, especially adolescents or dogs who have not been given the opportunity to interact with other dogs. Consider this in multiple dog households (or your wolf pack). The top ranked dogs, being secure in their place, don't need or want to exert more energy than necessary. A quick look or movement will do it. As a wise person once said, "Those who can, do. Those who can't, talk about it". Well, dogs growl or bark about it when they don't know what else to do or to defend themselves.

*Don't let the intensity, especially where children are involved, escalate to what you intuitively know will be an unacceptable behavior later on from an adult dog.*

If a biting incident occurs where skin is broken and stitches are needed, you have a serious problem. Seek help from your Veterinarian who can refer you to a Behaviorist. Most of us wait far too long and respond in a human way by making up stories to validate why the dog bit!

You can never be guaranteed dog-to-dog positive interactions, but your goal should be to strive for positive-people-friendly dogs. This doesn't mean your dog needs to love all people, but they should be confident enough to look to you for guidance before deciding to bite.

**OWNER-DOG RELATIONSHIP**

Let's think for a moment about those things that might prompt a growling session between an owner and their dog. Let's start by exploring our own relationship with our dog. Is it based upon mutual understanding? Has your dog been socialized and to a basic training class? Is the relationship based upon fear or respect?

Many past training methods implied that physical domination is necessary to have a good dog. Techniques such as the "Alpha Roll-over" cannot only be damaging to your relationship with your dog, it can also be physically dangerous.

Amongst dogs (or wolves), the subordinate dog rolls over *on it's own*, it isn't forced there. Plus, the dog knows you are not a dog. A true, confident pack leader will dominate more mentally than physically. When physical domination is used, it is quick and ends as quickly.

Awareness centered training is *joyful easy training (JET) that is integrated into daily living and learning with our dogs*. ACT is safe and effective. ACT gives the dog and owner confidence. It's empowering and preserves the relationship. The dog gets the opportunity to creatively and voluntarily offer behaviors without fear. The best relationship is a trusting one built on awareness, education, relationship and well-being.

*Note: Some dogs growl when resource guarding. Resources can be toys, food, family members or back yard. Teaching object exchanges, take it - leave it and being a good, respectable leader who sets fair boundaries will resolve most resource guarding issues. Supervise children around dogs. When in doubt seek help from a professional behaviorist.*

**Dog Talk  
Training and  
Wellness  
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**GROWLING**  
Dino-Dog to Respecto-dog

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