

GROWLING!
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It has been my experience that growling is one of the most misunderstood natural dog behaviors. We know that dogs need to dig, chew, chase, eat, pee, poop and bark. It follows that growling is very much a part of their nature as well.

Growling can be considered an ambiguous behavior. It isn't always clear to the novice observer what dogs are telling us when they growl. The best summary I have found on growling and ambiguous behaviors is an article written by Dr. Ian Dunbar titled, oddly enough, "Ambiguous Behaviors".

Dogs growl for any number of reasons. They can be reacting to a threat, scared, frustrated, exhibiting a lack of confidence or using it as a form of learned helplessness, or just playing.

Growling can be divided into three levels: the first is play, the second is fear-based and the third is used as a warning prior to aggression. Growling is used, when integrated with the dog's other behaviors, to communicate how she feels and what the next intentions or deemed course of action might be.

Think of ourselves in the morning before our first cup

of coffee. Have we been known to "growl"? Are we, as "educated observers of the human condition", aware of each other's relative state of mind? The answer is "Probably so". We know from experience to stay away from each other, allowing space to decompress.

How do we know when to give each other space? We watch and listen. We integrate the whole-body picture.

Dogs do the same thing; Except they have an added advantage in that they have their sense of powerful smells (they smell in Technicolor) and a wide angled lens (peripheral vision).

LOOK AT THE BIG PICTURE

What do you do if your dog is growling? First, try to determine what he is growling about. Is it play? Is it around food or toys? 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? Has this happened before? With children perhaps? How many times, where, when, with whom and what did you do? What were the results?

Journal this information as it is vital particularly if growling has become a

problem behavior that affects your relationship with your dog.

ARE YOU AFRAID?

If so, it's time to seek professional help immediately. This is a clear indication that leadership/relationship and/or other issues need to be assessed. Talk to your Veterinarian and have a complete health check. When dogs aren't feeling well, aging or there is too much "unfamiliar" stress in your life, it makes a difference.

Contact a behaviorist who has experience in observing not only the dogs' body language and behavior, but how the humans in the family interact as well. This isn't just about the dog.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

First, being pro-active, not reactive, is the essential key. All puppies and dogs should be trained to accept leadership, in a respectful way, from almost all members of the family. Children under 12 are usually perceived as littermates, not pack-leaders.

REACTIVE vs. RESPONSIVE

Understand that a dog's brain works in two realms (keeping it simple for training purposes) frontal

and hind. The frontal brain is responsive. The hind brain is reactive. If a dog is growling at a warning level, she is reacting from her hind brain and to a *perceived fear*. You cannot stop this reaction with brute force. You need to get the dog, and yourself, grounded and calm to be able to LEARN how to react calmly in diverse situations.

If you have a growly dog, the last thing you want to do is growl along with him by yelling and screaming.

Determine what the growling is connected too (stress, fear, unfamiliarity, health). Try a simple diversion / request to calmly take back control of the situation like - SIT.

Change the subject. Confronting an already fearful or growling dog is useless. The important thing is NO-ONE gets hurt. You can work on behavioral modification later.

Have the dog do another simple behavior, without threat, such as down, paw or "let's go out or to the crate."

Time-outs work well **especially if YOU are stressed and/or children are about.**

Remain neutral. If you become emotionally unglued with a dog that doesn't understand or is not desensitized to diverse

situations, energy-levels, different people, chances are you will make matters worse.

Never punish the dog for growling. We like dogs that growl. **It is the "dog's early warning system"**. This doesn't mean you ALLOW YOUR PUPPY to growl at you at the food bowl or over toys.

What you do is teach by owning the high-ranking-motivators and life rewards (food, toys, touch).

Punishing a growling behavior or trying to eliminate it from your dog's communication repertoire can be deleterious.

The only time that one of our training coaches was bitten by a 4-legged client was by a dog that was conditioned not to growl or touch human hands. It was sad.

CASE STUDY

The dog in question was a fourteen-month-old intact male German Shepherd Dog named (for the purposes of this study) "Buster". The oldest boy, 21-year-old Jack, had the dog from puppyhood. When Jack could no longer keep Buster where he was living, Buster was given to his 14-year-old younger brother, Billy who lived in the family home.

The family came for counseling. From the get-go, Buster's body language was deceiving our male coach.

Whenever Billy & Buster walked by, we'd give a neutral, side approach and reward Buster for his being neutral to us. This worked pretty well until ...

Buster approached Gary, the training coach, with what seemed a happy tail. Gary asked him to sit, which he did, pronto. He got a reward & healthy treat.

Buster seemed fine even to the experienced eye. He sniffed Gary's open hand and took another treat. Gary stepped a little closer and w/o thinking closed his hand for Buster to sniff, but w/o a treat. **BOOM! Ouch! & *#\$. Not a peep or warning and quicker than a human could move, Buster chomped Gary's fist.** This wasn't a serious bite, but enough to know that this was not normal, safe and needed to change.

It was a classic preemptive strike. Buster was saying, "I'll get you before you get me", but why?

Even with the best intakes, this is any behaviorist's worst nightmare and an empowering learning experience. This wasn't the first time this has happened, but the family held back on the WHOLE

TRUTH. They were now willing and trusted Gary enough to share that this is what was happening at home.

What the family shared after discovering that they had to choose: A latchkey dog or put Buster to sleep was that Buster was punished regularly for growling. How? They used to punch him in the nose ... hard. This may work for some dogs, but for others, including Buster, it can create a fear biter.

Buster may tolerate a punch in the nose from family members w/o biting, but he wasn't going to take it from a stranger. This creates an extremely confused and fearful, pre-emptive striking dog that does not give warning, just bites. The good news is that Buster had good bite inhibition. Otherwise, the wound would have been serious. If he truly wanted to hurt Gary (or anyone else) he could have.

GROWLY dogs give warnings. Dogs that have been brutally taught to NEVER GROWL are scary and unpredictable

A modification plan was created for Buster with a committed family. At 14 months Buster was clearly an adolescent dog who needed leadership, basic manners and socialization, with an experienced adult.

14-year-old Billy was clearly too inexperienced, so the family pulled together as a team.

Over a series of coaching sessions, Buster was neutered, and a desensitization plan was integrated into Buster's training program to build trust with humans.

The family worked on life rewards and leadership skills, controlling all that Buster needed including play, food and touch. Buster was requested to do use his energy for life rewards (food, play, touch, walking).

In time, we were able to confidently give him a treat with any kind of fist or hand. This was a fortunate case. Buster didn't WANT to bite people.

LEVELS OF GROWLING (Vocalizing)

It must be noted that the frequency and amount of vocalizing seems to be an individual thing. Clearly some breeds growl more than others. Puppies growl all the time.

To many people, perception is oftentimes more important than reality. Too many people view any growl as a bad growl.

The **first level of growling** is "play". Play growling manifests itself during roughhousing, such as

wrestling or tug-of-war. These behaviors are not species-exclusive: They can occur dog-to-dog or dog-to-people. These growls express pleasure and are not a matter for concern. What is important for humans to know is how to recognize thresholds of growling. If it is getting out of hand, then re-direct to calmer behaviors, SIT, DOWN, STAY.

Care must be taken to ensure that the play remains grounded and doesn't escalate to the next two levels.

Being grounded refers to keeping the play under control by periodically throwing in a request for a behavior, e.g. "sit, give... OK take it!"

The **second level of growling** is a growl based on fear. It is the dog's attempt to tell another creature "back off", you're making me nervous/scared.

Generally, fearful growling starts late in the "back off" game. If we understand postures and Calming Signals® (Turid Rugaas), then there should be ample other warnings that the dog is uncomfortable before they growl. Look at their eyes, ears & tail. Look at the situation.

The **third level of growling** comes prior to aggression. It is interesting to note that for the most part, the

growliest dogs are not the top-ranking dog, but rather blustery middle-ranking types looking to make their way to the top.

The top-ranking dog being secure in their place does not need to expend the extra energy. They save it for survival. If the pack were in the wild, survival would be based on a calm, respected pack provider, not a blustery middle ranking teenager.

OWNER-ANIMAL RELATIONSHIP

Let's explore what might prompt a growling session between an owner and their dog. Let's start by examining our own relationship with our dog. Is it based upon mutual understanding/relationship or fear?

Too many training methods over the years have relied on a human's interpretation of how dogs interact. Specifically, they imply that physical domination is necessary in order to have a compliant dog.

We know for sure that this is nonsense. Being a pack animal, what a dog needs is solid, respectable and trusting leadership. Dogs need communication that they can understand.

Techniques such as the "Alpha Rollover" can not only be damaging to your relationship with your dog, it

can also be physically dangerous. Children can't employ this kind of leadership and could get hurt.

Amongst dogs (or wolves), the subordinate dog rolls over **on its own**, it isn't forced there.

Do not allude yourself into thinking that the dog thinks you are a dog. They know you're not!

What does this mean to the dog? Simply that you're being cruel or acting nuts. A true Alpha Dog will dominate the lesser members of the pack mentally, calmly and assertively, not through physical domination. What happens is quick and usually too fast for the human eye.

Using methods of dominance that makes a dog cower does absolutely nothing for the relationship. And, a frightened dog can be a dangerous one.

If you cannot correct/teach a dog what you want in the moment, then it isn't a lesson. Dogs live in the present. Being reactive after the fact, unless the lesson is prompt and meaningful enough to make a difference, is useless.

The special relationship between dog and human is too precious to waste with our own insecurities or needs to be the "boss".

Training your dog can change your life. Living and learning with dogs is a joy!

With all the educational enrichment (resources) available today, it is my opinion that NO dog should have to withstand the ignorance of humans who haven't taken the time to plan, learn and teach.

We all make (and learn) from mistakes, and this includes with our dogs. That's okay, if dogs do not suffer the consequences of our oftentimes blissful ignorance.

Even if a situation warrants re-homing or euthanasia, it should be accomplished with common sense and with the dog's well-being in mind.

We learn so much from nature and dogs. It helps us raise awareness and expand our connections and relationships.

Seek out knowledge. It is empowering.

Enjoy the Journey while living and learning with dogs.

If you have any specific questions or issues, call to schedule a private coaching session at Dog Talk LLC www.dogtalk.com 603-635-DOGS (3647).