

THE FACTS ABOUT GROWLING



True or False: If a dog growls aggressively, you should show him who is boss and punish him.

False: Punishing a dog for showing aggression, including growling, can have many negative effects on your dog-and your relationship with your pet.



It can be frustrating and embarrassing when your dog growls, whether he's reacting to a visitor at your house, a passerby on the street, a groomer or a trip to the vet. Your gut reaction might be to raise your voice, jerk on the dog's collar or manhandle him into a controlled position. Here's why that's a bad idea.

Why you shouldn't punish

Force and fear-based tactics are dangerous both for you and your dog, because they can worsen your dog's behavioral problems and increase aggression and fear-based behavior. While punishment may temporarily inhibit the aggressive response, over time punishment often intensifies a dog's reaction and escalates his aggression or anxiety. Punishment also damages your relationship of trust with your dog, as your interactions become less predictable from the dog's point of view. **When you use force-based techniques, you increase the risk your dog will show aggression and bite, even if he growls less often.**

Why do dogs growl?

Growling is a communication signal, the goal of which is to get the receiver of the growl to withdraw or to stop an interaction. The dog is growling because he or she feels threatened or defensive.

Growling can also indicate your dog is playing. Use context and other body language signs to determine the meaning of the growl.

Growling most commonly occurs when a dog is approached by unfamiliar people or dogs, during handling and procedures (e.g. nail trimming), when the dog is verbally or physically reprimanded, or when someone tries to take away a valuable possession, such as a bone.

Growling can also occur in the context of playing. If the dog is play bowing, grinning with the mouth open and has a relaxed body posture the growl is not aggressive. Some dogs growl when seeking attention or play.

Signs of your pet's emotional state

Many forms of aggression are rooted in fear. When you punish your dog for aggressive displays, the punishment doesn't change the dog's emotional state to a positive one. It

simply suppresses your dog's way of releasing his anxiety. In other words, **punishment serves to temporarily mask the symptoms of the underlying issue, such as fear** of a stranger. In many cases the aggression intensifies with punishment. **Punishment may actually worsen your dog's fear and tension because your dog anticipates that you may be upset and he may be punished.** He then associates even more negative emotion with the person or thing he is growling at.

Punishment of the growling behavior hinders your dog's ability to communicate how he's feeling and decreases his warning signals before a bite. Dogs that have been punished for growling or other aggressive warning signals may progress faster into a bite, and they may display fewer warning signs. *We want your dog to growl so we can tell we are approaching his limit and he's losing his cool.*

Barking, growling, avoidance and observable behaviors are designed to communicate a message. If the message gets the desired outcome and it is understood, then the animal has been able to express himself. Research suggests this **REDUCES** anxiety and stress.

Depending on the situation, you may notice other signs of stress before your dog's fear escalates to growling. Turning the head away, licking the lips, pinning the ears back, cowering and freezing are other behaviors that can clue you in that your dog is frightened. In a perfect world, you would notice these signs first and if the situation isn't dialed back they would be followed by growling before snarling, snapping or biting.

An "air snap," where the dog deliberately snaps at the air in front of a target, is a commonly used signal to tell another dog to back off. If the stranger dog or unfamiliar human does back away, a normal response to that would be a de-escalation of aggression. Otherwise, the next step may be an actual bite.

Growling - the bark before the bite?

In many cases, a dog that seemingly "bites out of nowhere" has a history of having been punished for aggressive warnings, like growling. Even dogs said to bite without warning show subtle signs before escalating, such as freezing in place or the whites of their eyes showing, but the signs are often less noticeable and harder to read.

Though dogs speak in many ways through body language and other vocalizations, a growl is one way dogs communicate the loudest about their discomfort. We should listen, not punish! **If a growl occurs during punishment or correction it's a sign that you are being too heavy-handed. Persisting in punishment in these situations can result in severe bite injuries.** This is a serious risk and a major reason why we recommend positive reward training, not punishment!

When a dog communicates how he feels, such as growling at another person or dog, this is like the check engine light in a car that communicates all isn't right. It's much better for you - and for your dog - when you respect a growl as a warning and address it humanely.

When the dog growls, it is rarely a good time to "fix" the dog. Instead, remove the dog from the situation.

An important point: When the dog growls, it is rarely a good time to “fix” the dog and resolve the situation. First, there’s a high risk for a bite from the dog’s over-aroused emotional state. Second, your dog may not be prepared to learn a better response or association with the situation in the moment. He’s already upset. Instead, try pausing to stop the aversive scenario, or remove the dog from the situation. Then you can devise a plan to address your dog’s response in a helpful manner. In some cases, you can interrupt the negative behavior by redirecting the dog to do another behavior, like going to their bed, that you can reward.

Your dog may also benefit from a training plan to help in becoming more comfortable with the situation, such as training him to tolerate or even enjoy handling from less familiar people. We may recommend a veterinary behaviorist or a positive reinforcement trainer to help. To avoid injury to people during nail trims and other procedures, a muzzle may be needed.

Antianxiety medication may be recommended for visits to the veterinarian or groomer or before other frightening events such as the arrival of guests in the home. If these occasions provoke fear for your dog the kind thing is to relieve your dog’s stress and fear. Giving treats during procedures can also make a big difference.

In summary, growling and other aggressive displays are merely a symptom of a deeper underlying issue, such as fear. By addressing the issue in full and changing a dog’s emotion of fear into happy anticipation in the same scenario, the growl and other aggressive displays fade on their own.

If you need help to solve a behavior problem we can provide you with the names of some good trainers, a veterinary behavioral specialist and other resources.

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Ladder of Aggression

