



Growling— What is Your Dog Trying to Tell You?

Dogs are highly communicative and growling is part of their vocabulary. Growling is used as a warning but also used in playful interactions. When growling is accompanied by loose and relaxed body postures in play, growling is simply another play gesture. However, when growling accompanies a stiff, rigid body, stiff tail, hard stare or glassy stare, then it's not done in play, it's done as a warning.

For many humans, our first reaction when a dog growls is to verbally correct them (“don’t you growl at me!”) or physically punish them. Often we see a trainer recommend putting a shock collar on your dog and zap them every time they growl. Or, a human may smack a dog when they growl. But when that is done, we are taking away a valuable part of their communication system to us. The growl is a warning. It is a courtesy to humans to let us know they are not ok. If we punish them for telling us they are not ok, it is likely they will stop telling us. And, that puts humans in a dicey situation. In addition, it is not addressing the underlying issue. Suddenly, when you reach for that bone, you may no longer hear a growl. But...you didn’t change WHY they were growling and you may be surprised with a nasty bite!

If the behavior is not addressed internally, it will continue to exist. It may manifest itself in other ways or towards other people in the home, but it is not resolved. Punishing a symptom of the problem only puts you and others around at risk. And, it is certainly not fair (nor wise) to the dog to punish him for telling you to move away.

If your dog is growling at you in a way that does not seem playful, it’s time to change WHY they are growling, not the growl itself. Always move away from your dog if they are growling to avoid conflict. Then, work to resolve why they are growling. Consult with a behavior professional to assist you with the behavior issue that is causing your dog to growl.

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