

GROWLING! DOG TALK!

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Growling is one of the most misunderstood natural dog behaviors. We know that dogs need to dig, chew, chase, eat, pee, poop and bark. Growling is very much a part of their nature too.

Growling can be considered an ambiguous behavior. It isn't always clear to the novice observer what dogs are telling us when they growl.

Dogs growl for several reasons: reacting to a threat, scared, frustrated, exhibiting a lack of confidence or using as a form of learned helplessness, and while PLAYING.

Growling can be divided into three levels: One is play, the second is fear-based and the third is used as a warning prior to aggression. Growling is used to communicate how s/he feels and what the next intentions or course of action might be (back-off, lie down, over threshold – into a fight).

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 powerful olfactory (sense of smell). Good metaphor: they smell in Technicolor. They have peripheral vision – (side and front).

LOOK AT THE BIG PICTURE

What do you do if your dog is growling? First, ask and observe: What is s/he growling at? Is it play? Is it over food, toys, people? 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 matters.

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 essential. And, not easy. It is a learned “awareness” skill. 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 diversion - request to calmly take back control of the situation-SIT.

Be a shapeshifter by changing the situation. Create space, allow the dog to decompress, even call them with a treat and have them SIT. Confronting an already fearful or growling dog is useless, and possibly dangerous. The important thing is NO-ONE gets hurt. You can work on behavioral modification later. Avoid the same “growly” situations in the future until you have time to work with building confidence in yourself and the dog. A few more ...

Have the dog do a counter behavior, without threat,

such as down, paw or “let’s go out or to the crate.”

Time-outs work well **especially if YOU and the dog are stressed. Take a breath.**

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

TEACH. You have the high-ranking-motivators and life rewards (food, toys, touch, play). Use these to teach behaviors you want like sit, down, wait, stay, gentle, take-it, leave-it.

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 sad dog was a 14-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 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. 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.

When the family trustingly shared, we were informed that Buster was regularly punched for growling. He was a fear-biter.

The good news is that Buster had good bite inhibition. Otherwise, the wound would have been serious. If he genuinely wanted to hurt Gary (or anyone else) he could have. And yes, the story had a happy ending with a less fearful, trusting Buster.

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 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 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.

LEVELS OF GROWLING (Vocalizing)

The frequency and amount of vocalizing seems to be an individual thing. Some breeds growl more than others. Puppies growl all the time, even while playing.

Too many people view any growl as a bad growl.

The **first level of growling** is "play". Play growling manifests itself during play with other dogs, or games like 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 to know is how to recognize thresholds of growling. If it is getting out of hand, then re-direct to calmer behaviors like SIT, DOWN, STAY.

Teaching pups/dogs to jolly up and settle down is a must for all basic training classes. Our dogs learn what ENOUGH means.

Keep the dogs grounded 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. Be proactive

and aware of what is going on around you and the dog.

The **third level of growling** comes prior to aggression. 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 exploring our own relationship with our dog(s). Is it based upon mutual understanding and relationship or fear?

Over the years training methods have evolved from physical domination to teaching, relationship, education and well-being. Positive reinforcement is the best way to shape behaviors you want in puppies or older dogs.

Being a pack animal, what a dog needs is solid, respectable and trusting

leadership. Dogs need communication that they can understand; Learning what they can achieve. And, in a respectful way.

Techniques such as the "Alpha Rollover" are damaging to your relationship with your dog, it can 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!

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.

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 tolerate the ignorance of humans who haven't taken the time to plan, learn and teach.

We all make (and learn) from mistakes. This includes our dogs.

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