



Growling

I'm not even going to bother with a lead-in to this article. Simply, NEVER discipline or correct a dog for growling. Ever. Period.

There is a misconception that a growl is aggressive behavior. A growl is simply a vocal cue to what the dog wants. Most dogs will posture and vocalize to *avoid* aggression. In human terms, it's like someone gesturing and shouting before having to get physical. In potentially dangerous situations, dog will first give physical cues, then growl, then snarl, snap & finally bite. When we start training out any of these, dogs will become more likely to react aggressively without warning.

However, vocalizations are not only reserved for times of potential danger. Here are the most common types of growls and what they mean:

“Back Off” – this growl is the harshest-sounding and usually not mistaken. The dog clearly means, “I’m warning you”. It comes from the chest and is low in pitch. The dog’s body posture will also change; the head typically goes down sometimes slightly turned and he will keep an eye on the offender through the corner of his eyes. It will typically continue steadily until either the offender has retreated, or the dog feels threatened and then takes action. If a dog gives you one of these growls, respect it and slowly walk away, do not make eye contact, to avoid escalating the situation. If you are handling a dog that growls at another dog or person, the same concept applies. Try to remove him from the situation. Either ask the other handler to keep clear, or walk away yourself. Making sure your dog does feel escape is possible greatly minimizes these instances.

The Warning Signal – this growl may sound similar to the previous. However, posturing is much different. The dog typically stands at alert and may scan the area to investigate the problem. The intent behind this vocalization is “Hey everybody, I sense something”. It’s usually short and a precursor to alarm barking. A good example is if a dog hears something outside, he growl, run to look out the window, then bark at the delivery person standing outside your door.

Play Growling - as implied, growling is common during play. This is particularly true in games of tug. Play growls are sometimes given with the “bowing” posture to entice play. This growl comes from the throat and is usually higher in pitch than a dog’s warning growls. It normally halts when play is initiated, or the dog has won the toy.

Anytime you are not sure what the intention is behind a dog’s growl, play it safe. Assume that he wants you to back off and do so. This rule applies whether it’s your dog or not.

Indicating that you understand he is trying to communicate is the first step in building a dog’s trust. When our dogs growl, we need to show we are listening and want to support them. This gives us opportunities to intervene if necessary and further our role as leader. Trying to stop them from growling at all, takes away a clear warning signal, is detrimental to socialization, and diminishes their confidence in our leadership.

As a final reminder, if at anytime your dog growls at people to guard food, toys or other possessions, immediately contact a professional trainer.