

THE GIFT OF GROWL

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My clients always appear a bit stunned at first when I tell them their dog's growl is a good thing. In fact, a growl is something to be greatly treasured. These are my aggression consult clients, who are in my office in desperation, as a last resort, hoping to find some magic pill that will turn their biting dog into a safe companion. They are often dismayed and alarmed to discover that the paradigm many of us grew up with – punish your dog harshly at the first sign of aggression, has only contributed to and exacerbated the serious and dangerous behavior problem that has led them to my door.

On one hand it seems intuitive to punish growling. Growling leads to biting, and dogs who bite people often must be euthanized, so let's save our dog's life and nip biting in the bud by punishing him at the first sign of inappropriate behavior. Makes sense, in a way – but when you have a deeper understanding of canine aggression, it's easy to understand why it's the absolute wrong thing to do.

Most dogs don't want to bite or fight. The behaviors that signal pending aggression are intended first and foremost to warn away a threat. The dog who doesn't want to bite or fight tries his hardest to make you go away. He may begin with subtle signs of discomfort that are often overlooked by many humans – tension in body movements, a stiffly-wagging tail.

"Please," he says gently, "I don't want you to be here."

If you continue to invade his comfort zone, his threats may intensify, with more tension, a hard stare, and a low growl.

"I mean it," he says more firmly, "I want you to leave."

If those are ignored, he may become more insistent, with an air snap, a bump of the nose, or even open mouth contact that closes gently on an arm but doesn't break skin.

"Please," he says, "don't make me bite you."

If that doesn't succeed in convincing you to leave, the dog may feel compelled to bite hard enough to break skin in his efforts to protect self, territory, members of his social group, or other valuable resources.

What many people don't realize is that aggression is caused by stress. The stressor may be related to pain, fear, intrusion, threats to resources, and past association or anticipation of any of these things. An assertive, aggressive dog attacks because he's stressed by the intrusion of another dog or human into his territory. A fearful dog bites because he's stressed by the approach of a human. An injured dog lacerates the hand of his rescuer because he's stressed by pain.

When you punish a growl or other early warning signs, you may succeed in suppressing the growl, snarl, snap or other warning behavior – but you don't take away the stress that caused the growl in the first place. In fact, you increase the stress, because now you, the dog's owner, have become unpredictable and violent as well. And if you succeed in suppressing the warning signs, you end up with a dog who bites without warning. He learns that it's not safe to warn.

If a dog is frightened of children, he may growl when a child approaches. You, conscientious and responsible owner, are well aware of the stigma – and fate – of dogs who bite children, so you punish your dog with a yank on the leash and a loud "No! Bad dog!" Every time your dog growls at a child you do this, and quickly your dog's fear of children is

confirmed – children do make bad things happen! He likes children even less, but he learns not to growl at them to avoid making you turn mean.

You think he's learned that it's not okay to be aggressive to children, because the next time one passes by, there's no growl.

"Phew," you think to yourself. "We dodged that bullet!"

Convinced that your dog now accepts children because he no longer growls at them, the next time one approaches and asks if he can pat your dog, you say yes. In fact, your dog has simply learned not to growl, but children still make him very uncomfortable. Your dog is now super-stressed, trying to control his growl as the child gets nearer and nearer so you don't get mean, but when the scary child reaches out for him he can't hold back any longer – he lunges forward and snaps at the child's face. Fortunately, you're able to restrain him with the leash so he doesn't connect. You, the dog, and the child are all quite shaken by the incident.

Time to change your thinking. A growl is a dog's cry for help. It's your dog's way of telling you he can't tolerate a situation – as if he's saying, "I can't handle this, please get me out of here!"

Your first response when you hear your dog growl should be to calmly move him away from the situation, while you make a mental note of what you think may have triggered the growl. Make a graceful exit. If you act stressed you'll only add to his stress and make a bite more, not less, likely. Don't worry that removing him rewards his aggression – your first responsibility is to keep others safe and prevent your dog from biting.

If the growl was triggered by something you were doing, stop doing it. Yes, your dog learned one tiny lesson about how to make you stop doing something he doesn't like, but you'll override that when you do lots of lessons about how that thing that made him uncomfortable makes really, really good stuff happen. This is where counter conditioning comes in. Your dog growls because he has a negative association with something – say he growls when you touch his paw. For some reason, he's convinced that having his paw touched is a bad thing. If you start by touching his knee, then feeding him a smidgeon of chicken, and keep repeating that, he'll come to think that you touching his knee makes chicken happen. He'll want you to touch his leg so he gets a bit of chicken.

Note: Make sure your dog's discomfort with you touching his paw is not related to pain. If it hurts when you touch him there, counter conditioning won't work. It's a good idea to get a full veterinary workup if there's any chance your dog's growling may be pain-related.

When you see him eagerly search for chicken when you touch his knee, you can move your hand slightly lower and touch there, until you get the same "Where's my chicken?!" response at the new spot. Gradually move closer and closer to his paw, until he's delighted to have you touch his foot – it makes chicken happen! Now practice with each foot, until he's uniformly delighted to have you touch all of them. Remember that the touch comes first, so it consistently predicts the imminent arrival of chicken.

If at any time in the process – which could take days, weeks, or even months, depending on the dog and how well you apply the protocol – you see the dog's tension increase, you've moved too quickly. Back up a few inches to where he's comfortable being touched and start again. Or, there may be other stressors present that are increasing his tension. Do an environment check to be sure nothing else is happening that's adding to his stress. Have the rowdy grandkids leave the room, give him a little time to relax, and start again.

Remember, dogs can't tell us in words what's bothering them, but they can communicate a lot with their body language and canine vocal sounds. Pay attention to what your dog is telling you. Listen with heart and compassion. Be gentle when your dog tells you he needs help. Come to his rescue. Treasure his growl.