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Four Things You Should Know About Your Dog's Growl

Growling is an early warning system. Your job is to figure out what's wrong.

Sara Reusche (/author/sara-reusche) | Mar 7th 2013 | 39 Contributions

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The little dog had been in our training center for 15 minutes before he noticed the giant painting of a dog hanging on the wall. His eyes widened as he took a step toward it, growling. "Pssht!" his owner hissed, snapping her fingers at him. He jerked in surprise, then sat down and licked his lips. He didn't growl again, but continued to stare at the painting, trembling slightly, paw raised.



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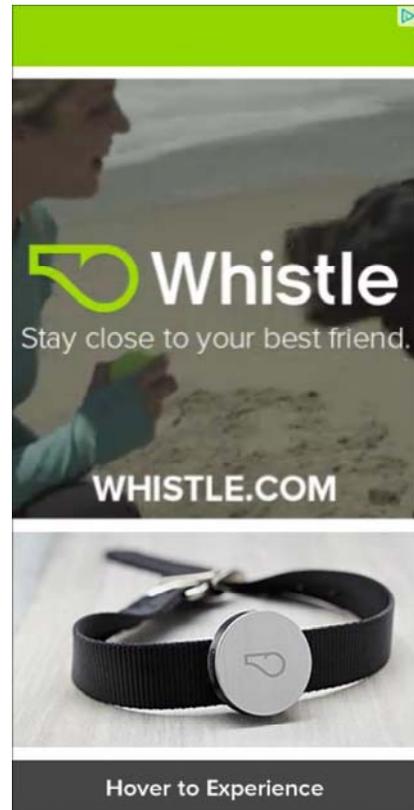
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This little dog growls because he may have few other defenses. Fluffy dog with underbite (<http://www.shutterstock.com/pic.mhtml?id=1323545>) by Shutterstock

Dogs growl for a variety of reasons. Fear, insecurity, guarding behavior, offensive aggression, and play can all elicit growls, although to an expert these growls are each unique in their tone and pitch. Outside of play, growling serves as a warning that all is not well in the dog's world. Something is off, and our dog is doing us the courtesy of sharing that information.

"Why did you just snap at your dog?" I asked the little dog's owner.

"I want him to know that I won't tolerate that behavior," she replied.

It's human nature to respond negatively to a dog's growl. Growling is an undesirable behavior and can oftentimes be a precursor to a bite. However, as I explained to the little dog's owner, it's important to suppress your urge to correct your dog for growling. Thank your dog for growling, and remove or redirect him from the situation that's provoking the growl. It's better than the alternative.

Here are four things you need to know about your dog's growl:

1. Growling serves as a warning signal

It tells you that your dog is unhappy or uncomfortable. Something is wrong. Think of it as an early warning system.



The dog on the left is too close, so the dog on the right is giving a warning snarl. Greyhound and terrier (<http://www.shutterstock.com/pic.mhtml?id=63363940>) by Shutterstock

2. Punishing a dog for growling takes away your early warning system

Dogs who are punished for growling oftentimes learn not to growl. However, getting rid of the growl doesn't fix the underlying cause for growling, which leaves us with a dog who is just as upset as before, but now has no way to express that discomfort except for escalating his display. The growl may be gone, but now you've created a dog who will bite "without warning."

3. All dogs warn

If your dog doesn't warn before he bites, it's either because you're missing his precursor signals or because he no longer feels safe displaying them. Either way, the fault here lies at the other end of the leash.

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*Dogs who warn you before biting are easier to treat. Husky bares teeth
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Dogs who go straight to biting without displaying lots and lots of precursors are much more difficult to treat. I would much rather work with a dog who stiffens up, displays whale eyes, hard-stares me, curls his lip, growls, freezes, and then (finally) bites, than a dog who goes straight from a freeze to a bite. It will be much easier to keep the situation safe with the first dog. The latter case is much riskier.

4. If your dog growls, he believes he has a valid reason to do so

The little dog was understandably worried by what he perceived was a giant dog, frozen and staring at him (both confrontational and potentially aggressive behaviors) from across the room.

His owner would have done better to acknowledge his fear, using treats to reward him for looking at, and later on investigating, the frightening painting (and she will in the future, as she now has the tools to better deal with situations that make her dog uncomfortable). His growl was merely a symptom of his insecurity in this situation. Treating the underlying cause will make the symptom disappear far more effectively than suppressing it.



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Growling is a symptom of insecurity in a situation. Growling dog (<http://www.shutterstock.com/pic.mhtml?id=2229822>) by Shutterstock

Sara Reusche is the owner of Paws Abilities Dog Training (<http://www.paws4u.com/>) in Rochester, MN. She has more than a decade of training experience. She became a Certified Professional Dog Trainer in 2005 and a Certified Veterinary Technician in 2006. She has also worked as a dog groomer, vet tech, doggy daycare attendant, and animal shelter caretaker and trainer. She spends most of her time working with serious behavior cases and has a special fondness for reactive and anxious dogs. This post previously ran on her dog behavior blog, Paws Abilities (<http://paws4udogs.wordpress.com/>), and is rerunning here with her permission.

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What situations cause your dog to growl? How have you addressed those situations? Please share your stories in the comments!

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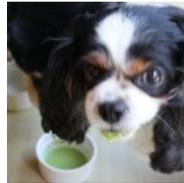


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Joe Stud · a month ago

I think the same goes for barking. I will let my dog bark at things to a point. I never reprimand her during the first few barks, I will even pretend to investigate the mail man who gets barked at every day. But if I do not tell her to "settle down" she will go on barking for 10 minutes after the mail man is out of site. I praise her for letting me know someone was in our space, then tell her its time to stop. This is usually done with distraction, a toy, a piece of kibble, but I try to avoid yelling at her, but I will admit, just as much as she has the right to use her voice, sometimes I get cranky with her for doing it. But I would never want her to not bark, especially if it is 3am and its not the mail man at the door but some guy trying to break in.

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Jenn Lindsay · a month ago

I completely agree with this, however i'm a little perplexed with my dog. I have a

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