



RSPCA School for Dogs Information Sheet

Growling

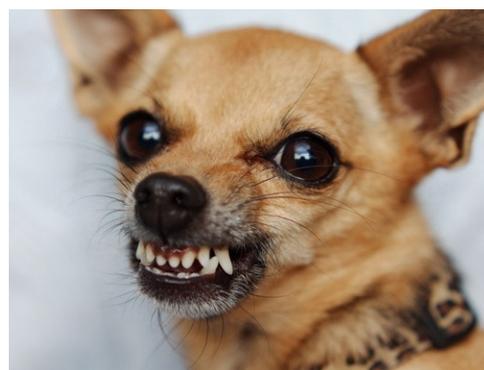
Why do dogs growl?

Growling is one of many ways dogs can communicate. Growling can be the result of a dog being scared, intimidated, threatened, uncomfortable or stressed.

What is a growling dog trying to communicate?

When a dog growls, they are trying to convey the message that they would like more space. It is a “distance increasing” behaviour.

The dog wants to increase its distance from what is worried about.



In what situations could a dog growl?

Guarding resources

A valuable resource is very worthwhile guarding. Resources may be a bone, a chew, a food bowl, a person, a resting space, a toy, a car, a space where a bone is buried to name just some. All resources have different values in each dog’s mind. So some dogs may find their resting spot valuable, for others it a bone or any type of food. Refer to our Resource guarding info sheet.

Fear or threat

A dog who is scared and/or threatened has a very good reason to growl. Dogs can be scared of many different things, from people, other dogs, strange objects, people taking something away from them or trying to move them by force (see resource guarding), being physically moved or pushed, scared of being punished or abused.

Injury

If a dog is unwell or sore, quite often he will growl if touched in or near a certain area. If you notice a behaviour change in your dogs, always see your vet to rule out any medical issues.

Why should you not reprimand growling?

It is natural for us to be quite offended if a dog growls at us. Many people’s natural reaction is to punish a growling dog, with the aim to prevent their growling. While this can be effective in that the dog may stop growling, it will eventually make the situation worse. Growling is just a step along the communication chain. The first step is signs of stress and being uncomfortable. These include lip licking, head turning and showing the whites of the eyes. Then a dog may become very still, usually called a freeze. It is at this stage where the dog usually growls. Then, it may show teeth while growling. After the growling, if we still don’t back away, then the dog may resort to



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lunging, snapping, biting or nipping. If we punish the dog for growling, the dog will learn to go straight to the snap or bite, and give no or little warning before they do.

What should you do if your dog growls?

It is common to miss the preceding signs a dog shows before growling. So the dog had tried to convey how it is feeling to you, but in his mind, you are ignoring him! Once you get good at recognising the more subtle signs, you can then remove yourself or your dog from the situation before any growling occurs.

If your dog does growl, then give him some space, move away and don't punish him. Heed the warning and avoid being bitten! If your dog is growling at you or your family members, please contact us.

Also refer to our information sheets on Resource guarding, training dogs to overcome their fears, timid dogs and fear aggression for more information.

Remember, growling is good!

Resources

Farricelli, Adrienne Janet, Why Growling Should Never Be Supressed in Dogs, Pethelpful, <https://pethelpful.com/dogs/Why-Growling-Should-Never-be-Suppressed-in-Dogs>

Miller, Pat, 2018, 5 Steps to Deal with a Growling Dog, Wholedog Journal, https://www.whole-dog-journal.com/issues/12_10/features/Dealing-With-Dog-Growling_16163-1.html

Collins, Chrstitine, 2017, The Gift of a Growl, <https://christinecollinscaninebehaviour.com/2017/10/30/the-gift-of-a-growl/>

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