

Growling is Not a Bad Thing: A few notes about a common concern

Karen Peak

[West Wind Dog Training](#)



Please note: this is not addressing play growling. This addresses growling because your dog is unsure or not comfortable with a situation.

GROWLING

- Growling is a dog's way of letting you know something is wrong:
 - He is scared
 - Something is making him feel threatened
 - He is confused
- Punishing growling can increase the problem and make matters worse even if there appears to be a short-term "improvement":
 - "I cannot growl because bad things happen" is one lesson the dog is learning
 - Dog now "gives no warning before biting" because we taught him to stop
 - Dog builds up pressure and "explodes" because he is still stressed
 - Dog reacts to situation with greater intensity
 - Dog no longer thinks flight is an option so he goes into FIGHT mode and tries to drive off the scary before he gets punished.
- When a dog growls, he is communicating and you must respond appropriately:
 - Do not punish, you will make matters worse long term, even if the dog appears to "get better" short term.
 - Calmly and quietly get the dog OUT of the situation and begin working
- The dog needs to be counter-conditioned and desensitized.
 - Counter Conditioning is retraining the dog to associate the scary thing/situation with positive things. The bad becomes a good (which will not happen through punishment).
 - Desensitizing is giving the dog SMALL doses of what he is stressed or afraid while giving a positive association to it.
 - These should be done with the guide of a good trainer or behaviorist that knows the difference between desensitizing and flooding the dog with the negative to try and "make him face his fears and realize they are silly."

- While counter conditioning and desensitizing, you need to make sure the dog is safe when you are not in a position to work with the entire situation. If he is exposed to the scary/threatening thing and gets a negative association again, your work to this point has been set back.
 - All family members and visitors MUST adhere to the rules and training in order for it to be most effective. If one member keeps punishing the growls, your program will not be as effective and the dog may worsen.
 - Use leashes, crates, quiet rooms, etc. to give your dog security during the times you are not able to set up scenarios.
 - Scenarios must be practiced many times a day to be most effective.
- If you are not willing to do the work, ask yourself:
 - Am I willing to make any changes to my schedule and environment in order to keep my dog safe and others safe?
 - Am I willing to accept all liability for my dog?
 - Am I willing to risk losing my homeowner's insurance should my dog bite someone and a claim be filed?
 - Am I willing to face eviction (if you rent) if my dog poses a risk and a complaint is made to the landlord?
 - Am I willing to face a lawsuit or cover all medical bills for any damage my dog does?
- If the answer is no, then:
 - Are you willing to do the work?
 - Are you willing to find someone who can and will rehabilitate the dog and give the dog the environment needed?
 - And you must divulge everything to the person acquiring the dog
 - If you have consulted with a trainer, put the new owner/rescue in contact with the trainer.
 - If the dog is deemed too risky to re-home and rehabilitate, are you willing to do what is needed to keep the public safe? Remember, this could be for the next 10 – 15 years depending on the current age of the dog.

Luckily, most dogs can be rehabilitated to various degrees if the owner is willing and able to commit to the work and the trainer sought understands how to counter-condition and desensitize the dog. If the trainer tells you to punish the dog, let him know who is boss, etc, RUN! Even dogs growling because they are deemed dominant are expressing stress at a situation (i.e. "You are invading my territory", "I am confused by you and trying to fix the situation", "I do not like what is going on") and the dog still needs desensitizing and counter-conditioning.

How you handle a growling dog can be the difference between the dog coming around and the dog escalating to a bite.

This may be reproduced in its entirety for educational purposes. It may be used in part with proper credit given. This is no substitute for working with a trainer and was created to help owners think and open lines of dialogue with the people they seek for assistance. ©2011 West Wind Dog Training