

# The facts about growling

**True or false:** If a dog growls aggressively, you should show him who's boss and punish him.

**False.** Punishing a dog for showing aggression, including growling, can have many negative effects on your dog—and your relationship with your pet.

It can be frustrating and embarrassing when your dog growls, whether he's reacting to a visitor at your house or a passerby on the street. Your gut reaction might be to jerk on the dog's collar or manhandle him into a controlled position. Here's why that's a bad idea.

## Why you shouldn't punish

Force and fear-based tactics are extremely dangerous both for you and your dog, because it can worsen your dog's behavioral problems and increase aggression and fear-based behavior. While punishment may temporarily inhibit the aggressive response, stifling a growl, over time punishment often intensifies a dog's reaction and escalates his aggression or anxiety. Punishment also damages your relationship of trust with your dog, as your interactions become less predictable. When you use force-based techniques, you increase the risk your dog will show aggression—and bite.

## Signs of your pet's emotional state

Many forms of aggression are rooted in fear. When you punish your dog for aggressive displays, the punishment doesn't change the dog's emotional state to a positive one. It simply suppresses your dog's way of releasing his anxiety. Punishment temporarily masks the symptoms of the underlying issue, such as fear of the stimulus that causes his barking and growling. The symptoms may temporarily fade, but the emotion—and the problem—remain, even if it's dormant for a period. In many cases, the aggression intensifies with punishment. Punishment may heighten your dog's negative association and tension because your dog anticipates you may be upset and may punish the growling.

Punishment hinders your dog's ability to communicate how he's feeling and decreases his warning signals before

a bite. Dogs that have been punished for growling or other aggressive warning signals may progress faster into a bite, and they may display fewer warning signs.

## Growling—the bark before the bite?

In many cases, a dog that seemingly “bites out of nowhere” has a history of having been punished for aggressive warnings, like growling. Even the dogs said to bite without warning still show subtle signs before escalating, such as a freeze or the whites of their eyes showing. But the signs are often less noticeable and harder to read. Though dogs speak in many ways through body language and other vocalizations, a growl is one way dogs communicate the loudest about their discomfort.

When a dog communicates how he feels, such as growling at another person or dog, this is like the check engine light in a car that communicates all isn't right. It's much better for you—and for your dog—when you respect a growl as a warning and address the action humanely later.

An important point: When the dog growls, this is rarely the time to “fix” the dog and resolve the situation. First, there's a high risk for a bite from the dog's overaroused emotional state. Second, your dog may not be prepared to learn a better response or association with the situation in the moment. Instead, try pausing to either stop the aversive scenario or remove the dog if needed. Then you can devise a plan to address your dog's response in a helpful manner. In some cases, you can interrupt the negative behavior by redirecting the dog to do another behavior, like going to their bed, that you can reward.

Your dog may also benefit from a training plan to help become more comfortable with the situation, such as training him to tolerate or even enjoy handling from less familiar people. Your veterinarian may recommend a veterinary behaviorist or work with a positive reinforcement trainer to help.

Growling and other aggressive displays are merely a symptom of a deeper underlying issue, such as fear. By addressing the issue in full and changing a dog's emotion of fear into happy anticipation in the same scenario, the growl and other aggressive displays fade on their own as you change your dog's emotional state.

