

Is Your Dog's Growl a Sign of Affection?

Explore the surprising reasons behind your dog's growls, and learn how these vocalizations can signal love, playfulness or a need for space, enhancing your pet-parent relationship.

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Dogs growl in a variety of situations and for a variety of reasons; dog growls aren't always threatening, and it's important for pet parents to learn to interpret their own dog's growls and take appropriate action if and when necessary
- A few years ago, a team of researchers conducted a study to see how well humans interpret three different types of dog growls; the volunteers correctly matched the growls to the right context 63% of the time, and were best at picking out play growls
- In an earlier study, the same researchers studied dogs' understanding of the growls of other dogs; the dogs easily distinguished food-guarding growls from stranger danger and play growls
- Growling is a normal and necessary form of canine communication that dog parents should not discourage

Growling in dogs has an undeserved reputation as a "bad" behavior, when in fact, it's an entirely natural, normal canine communication tool. While it's true that dogs growl as a warning or sign of defense, growling can also be a signal that a dog needs space or is otherwise uncomfortable.

In addition, many dogs growl during play, when greeting another dog or human, when they're verbally or physically corrected, or when they're guarding a resource like a favorite napping spot, toy, treat, or bowl of food.

Bottom line: Dog growls, which are typically associated with aggression, aren't always threatening. Canines naturally growl in a variety of situations and for a variety of reasons, which is why it's important to learn to interpret your own dog's growls and take appropriate action if and when necessary.

Understanding Different Types of Dog Growls

In 2017, researchers at the Family Dog Project at Eötvös Loránd University in Hungary conducted a study to determine how well humans understand different types of dog growls.¹ Past studies have focused on how well people interpret dog barks, but this was one of the first to examine growling.

For the study, the researchers made audio recordings of 18 dogs growling in three different scenarios: when they encountered an unfamiliar dog or human, when they were defending their dinner, and during play. The recordings were then played for 40 human volunteers, who were asked to match each growl to the specific activity they felt the dog was engaged in.

In total, the volunteers correctly matched the growl with the right activity 63% of the time, which indicates that humans are doing more than simply guessing about the nature of dog growls. The researchers also observed that women, at a 65% success rate, are better at interpreting growls than men, who guessed correctly only 45% of the time.

Not surprisingly, the team also found that people who had a dog at home or worked with dogs regularly were 20% better at understanding the growls than people who aren't around dogs. The volunteers most often correctly recognized growls during play, but had trouble distinguishing between food guarding and "stranger danger" growls.

Dogs Defer to the Food-Guarding Growls of Other Dogs

A few years ago, the same research team studied how dogs respond to the growls of other dogs.²

The researchers recorded a series of play growls, threatening growls, and food-guarding growls. Next, they put a hard-to-resist meaty bone in a room along with a recorder set to play the three different types of growls. One by one, the dogs were brought into the room with the bone and allowed free access to it.

In each 90 second experiment, as a dog approached the bone, he heard a recorded play growl, threatening growl, or food guarding growl. The researchers observed that neither the play nor threatening growls deterred most of the dogs from helping themselves to the bone.

Only the food-guarding growl kept the majority of dogs from grabbing it up. Eleven of 12 dogs backed away from the bone immediately upon hearing the food-guarding growl, and only 7 of the 12 returned to it within 90 seconds.

Four out of 12 dogs who heard the play growl backed off the bone, as did only 2 out of 12 who heard the threatening growl. And only one dog in each of these groups continued to stay away from the bone for the duration of the experiment.

What NOT to Do When Your Dog Growls

When your dog growls, depending on the situation your first reaction may be to tell him to stop. But what many people don't realize is that stopping the growling can lead to bigger problems down the road.

When your dog growls he's trying to tell you something, typically that he's feeling uncomfortable or afraid. He's giving you a wordless warning because he can't talk, and as such, you should view his growling as not only acceptable, but desirable.

Punishing your dog for growling may teach him not to do it, but that means he may not give any warning in situations that stress him out. The end result could be that he suddenly freezes in fear or even bites someone unexpectedly. It can catch you completely off guard because you've taught him not to communicate with you through growling.

Punishment may suppress your dog's growl but it won't change his emotional state. He'll still be fearful or uncomfortable, and those feelings can trigger aggression in many dogs. Punishing an already fearful dog will only increase his anxiety and encourage aggression and other fear-based behaviors.

Punishing your dog for growling can also hinder communication between the two of you, and can damage the bond you share.

So while you probably don't want your dog to growl (especially at you), punishing this normal form of canine communication will very likely backfire and make your dog even more fearful and potentially more aggressive.

It will also decrease the likelihood that he'll growl the next time he's feeling uncomfortable, which means you'll lose out on this valuable form of canine-human communication. And again, if your dog stops growling, you may not receive a warning before he's pushed past his limit and potentially acts out aggressively.

What to Do When Your Dog Growls

- **Stop what you're doing** — If you know your dog may bite soon after a growl, immediately stop, back away and get to a safe place (you should also move away from any unfamiliar dog that's growling). If you know your dog may growl but is unlikely to bite, stop what you're doing but stay where you are.

When your dog relaxes, move away (which rewards her for relaxing, not for growling). If necessary (and you know you can do so without a risk of being bitten), remove her from the situation.

- **Figure out why she growled** — What caused your dog to feel uncomfortable or fearful? Were you trying to cut her nails? Taking her food away? Trying to get her to go outside (or come inside)? It's important to know what situation caused your dog's response.
- **Create a plan to make the situation less stressful** — You may need to get creative here or even seek the help of a professional **positive reinforcement trainer**. For instance, if your dog growls when you try to groom her, distract her with treats while someone else does the grooming.

You can also try to redirect her by offering a more positive experience, such as playtime, or direct her to go to her bed and then reward the behavior.

- **Try to eliminate stressors** — Dogs get stressed out too, and just like in people, the stress can add up. If you've had houseguests, for instance, a dog that's used to a quiet household may be on edge. If you then take her to the groomer or a storm rolls in and she's afraid of thunder, she's likely to be even more anxious than normal.

Overall, the more you can reduce stressors in your dog's environment, the better, and in cases where stress can't be eliminated, at least be sure she has a safe, quiet place to retreat to (such as a cozy crate).

- **To address the growling, address the fear** — Growling is a symptom of a larger issue; a sign that your dog is afraid and unable to tolerate a given situation. There's no point in punishing the "symptom" of growling, as it's simply your dog's way of telling you that something's wrong.

Instead, figure out what's making her uncomfortable and then come up with a plan to address it. In cases where the fear-triggering scenario cannot be changed (such as visits to the vet or groomer), use techniques such as distraction to diffuse the tension. You can also seek the help of a behaviorist or other trainer to help your dog become less fearful.

It's important to recognize that growling among puppies or dogs who are playing is typically perfectly normal

and needs no intervention. As long as your dog is showing no other **signs of aggression**, you can assume that occasional growling during play is just part of the fun.

Sources and References

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¹ [Farago T, Takacs N, Miklosi A, Pongracz P. 2017. Dog growls express various contextual and affective content for human listeners. Royal Society Open Science, 170134](#)

² [Farago, T. et al. Animal Behaviour, Volume 79, Issue 4, April 2010, Pages 917-925](#)
