

A Growl is a Good Thing!

Has your dog ever growled? If so, you're not alone. Whether it's in one of our group classes or in an in-home behavior consultation, people seem to be either embarrassed or angry because their dog has growled. Just as it's unrealistic for a person to go through their entire life and never raise their voice, it's also unrealistic to expect your dog never to growl.

In reality, a growl is a good thing! A growl is your dog's way of saying they're not comfortable with whatever it is that's occurring at the moment they growled. Whether it's growling at another dog, a person or perhaps you're not even sure exactly what the dog is reacting to, from the dog's point of view, there "is" a reason.

Unfortunately, in response to the dog saying "Help! I'm not comfortable with this situation," most often, the owner's response is to shout at the dog or put their hands over the dog's muzzle in an attempt to keep them quiet, adding an additional layer of stress on top of an already stressed dog. Think about it. If you were already uncomfortable with a specific situation and were trying to let your friend know by raising your voice and your friend slapped their hand over your mouth in an attempt to quiet you, would that make you more comfortable? I doubt it.

Here are five things you can do if your dog growls:

1. Embrace the situation. Realize your dog's vocalization is a sign your dog is uncomfortable. Don't be embarrassed.
2. Assess the situation. Look around and attempt to determine what the trigger (the stimulus) was that caused your dog to growl.
3. Increase distance between your dog and the stimulus. Sometimes distance alone will help your dog become more comfortable.
4. Be prepared to remove your dog from the situation if increasing distance didn't help. Don't be tempted to make the dog endure an already uncomfortable environment which can increase stress and also exacerbate the dog's behavior.
5. Change your dog's opinion about the thing that made them growl. Perhaps it's a small child and the dog hasn't been around children. Instead of a dog thinking "child = bad thing!" you want them to think "child = good thing!" Counter conditioning and desensitization is the appropriate way to accomplish this and very effective when implemented slowly and

consistently over time. If you feel you're over your head, call in the help of a dog trainer who uses positive techniques and who is also skilled in behavior modification. Here's info on how to choose a dog trainer.

And a final note of caution: Never, ever punish your dog for growling. Punishment might make the dog stop growling, but the underlying emotional stress is still there. If you use punishment, you're merely taking away the "warning signal.....the growl" which is your dog's way of saying, "I'm uncomfortable!" and the dog may go straight to a bite.

So, if your dog growls, consider it a good thing and do the work necessary to help your furry friend in the midst of a stressful situation.