

## Animal Friends Presents

### When Dogs Growl or Snap: What NOT to do

If your dog recently growled or snapped, you may be wondering why. After all, you may have done your research and made sure you adopted the best dog for your family. Does this sudden behavior change mean you must rehome him, or worse? Does it mean you have a dominant dog on your hands that you must force to be submissive? What would suddenly make your dog act aggressively?

To us humans, expressions of canine aggression are unacceptable behaviors. However, for a dog, they're simply ways of communicating. From a dog's perspective, there's always a good reason for aggressive behavior. The good news is that growling and snapping don't necessarily mean that worse behavior is inevitable.

Simply put, dogs can't use words to talk to us. They can't say, "Please don't do that to me. I don't like it." They can't reason with a small child to quit pulling their ears or quit crawling on them. Instead, they communicate via the only means available to them—they growl or snap.

Humans and dogs have different communication systems and as a result, there are often misunderstandings between the species. Many dogs are uncomfortable with being hugged or being approached with direct eye contact. When humans approach dogs in this way, they usually intend to be friendly, but dogs may perceive this behavior as threatening or intimidating, and react accordingly.

There's no way around it: we don't want canine aggression in our homes. A dog's aggression can lead to a bad outcome if your dog bites someone. The good news is that a growl or snap is your dog's way of communicating a warning—and your dog is choosing to warn you instead of biting.

In the past, many dog trainers viewed growling and snapping as dominant behaviors and advised dog owners to respond by doing alpha rolls (forcing the dog down onto the ground and onto his back), stare-downs (staring at the dog until he looks away, which signals his acknowledgement that you are dominant over him), shaking his scruff, and long, forced "stays." Unfortunately, even though a wealth of information now exists about the hazards of these training techniques, a number of trainers continue to use them, including popular celebrity dog trainers who make them appear effective through highly-choreographed video editing. Some trainers recommend even harsher methods for dealing with aggression such as shock collars, which allow you to administer a shock to dog when he displays aggressive behavior. You'd be best advised to stay away from such trainers and advice.

Any trainer/behaviorist who understands dog behavior and the psychological process behind modifying behavior knows that punishment does not help aggression. In fact, punishment often makes the problem worse. If the aggression is motivated by fear, punishment will only make the dog more fearful, and therefore more aggressive. Attempting to punish a pushy or controlling dog is likely to make his behavior even worse. In either case, the dog and owner end up in a vicious cycle of escalating aggression.

Punishing territorial, possessive or protective aggression is likely to elicit additional defensive aggression and is likely to ultimately result in worse behavior.



Sometimes, dog owners assume that punishment prevents further aggressive behavior. I probably could have intimidated my dog into not growling at me again. But would that have solved the underlying problem? Not at all.

If you don't address the underlying issue—perhaps of fearfulness or possessiveness—behind your dog's aggressive behavior, you're not changing your dog's feelings about the incident that caused the growl in the first place. The danger in this is that even if you're successful in making your dog suppress a growl, your punishment might intensify his feelings. Thus, the next time a similar incident happens, your dog will still feel threatened and become more likely to bite. The dog has learned that his warning (growling) doesn't work, and in his mind, the next logical step is a bite.

It's also important to remember that your dog will associate his punishment with whatever is causing him to be upset in the first place. For example, if you punish your dog for growling at a crawling toddler (when your dog was just trying to tell the toddler, "Please don't bother me!"), your dog may interpret your punishment as "I get yelled at when that child crawls towards me." Thus, the punishment could cause an escalation of aggression towards the child.

The moral of this story is that we want our dogs to communicate with us. We want them to warn us when they feel uncomfortable or threatened and we want them to know we'll respect their warning. If they growl and we respect the growl, they're much less likely to resort to further aggression in the future. The purpose of this article, however, is not to advise you to be permissive with your dog or to ignore the circumstances that caused the growl. If your dog is growling, there is something bothering him and you must address it. It's important to understand why your dog is growling and what you can do to fix the problem proactively rather than punitively. Your dog will thank you and you will ultimately reap the reward of having a great relationship with your dog.

If you wish to learn more about how dogs perceive human behavior, behaviorist Patricia McConnell has written two very insightful and easy-to-read books about this titled *The Other End of the Leash* and *For the Love of a Dog*.

If you have any questions or concerns about your dog's behavior, visit [www.ThinkingOutsideTheCage.org](http://www.ThinkingOutsideTheCage.org)