

# **What to Do When Your Dog Growls**

**Beth Bradley**

What should you do when your dog growls at you? The short answer is: Consult a professional trainer. A growl is a warning—it is the dog's way of saying "I don't like what's happening. If the situation continues I will bite." Any behavior that could lead to a bite should be addressed with professional assistance. This article will help you understand some of the reasons for growling and some of the strategies a trainer may recommend for addressing the problem. However, each dog is different, and the first step must be a professional, in-person evaluation of your dog. With the correct information, you and the trainer can come up with a plan that is appropriate and safe for your dog and your situation.

## **Why Is Your Dog Growling?**

There are a wide variety of reasons a dog might be giving a growl warning. He may be feeling scared, possessive, tired, unsociable, or protective. The common denominator is that the dog is trying to warn; he doesn't necessarily want to bite but if pushed he will do so. What is tricky is that you don't want to correct and remove the warning; you want to correct and remove the dog's belief that he can, should, or needs to take charge of a situation he doesn't like. The key to success is understanding what your dog is growling about.

- if your dog is growling over food or a bone, he is showing dominant behavior. A trainer can help you safely re-establish your leadership position so that your dog does not feel entitled or empowered to protect his food or belongings.
- If your dog growls when strangers approach, he is probably afraid. A trainer can help you develop a socialization plan that decreases his fear of unfamiliar people or situations and increases his confidence in you as a leader that will keep him safe.
- If your dog is growling when you try to move him off the furniture, he is testing his boundaries and challenging your leadership. He is pushing back against your right to make the decisions about where he should be or how he should behave. A trainer can help you re-establish your leadership role without putting yourself in jeopardy of being bitten.

## **You Can't Change Temperament**

It is possible that your dog's growling problem is due to his personality and temperament. Although effective training can change your dog's behavior, it cannot change his temperament.

A trainer can advise you on whether your dog's temperament is contributing to the issues you are experiencing. If that is the case, a trainer should be able to come up with a program to minimize your chances of being growled at or bitten by your dog. This in no way means that you have to wear kid gloves when interacting with your dog; rather, a trainer will teach you strategies to safely but effectively deal with situations such as when your dog has a bone or is on the couch.

## **Don't Reinforce the Behavior**

People sometimes reinforce the dog's growl without realizing that they are doing so. For instance, when a young puppy meets someone new and growls, you might think you should bend down to reassure him by talking to and petting him. Unfortunately, that response encourages him to repeat and even escalate the behavior. After a while the dog thinks you like it and the growl becomes a lunge or a bite. Similarly, laughing at young pups when they growl or bare teeth rewards the dog with attention and approval. He will continue to growl, bare his teeth, and eventually nip and bite. For dogs that are fearful of strangers, people sometimes give the stranger treats to offer to "make friends." Instead, the dog sees the treat as a reward for his aggressive stance. He will continue, and possibly increase, his aggressive stance

## **Now What?**

You may be wondering what you CAN do. Growling is not an easy behavior to train, but it is not impossible. A good trainer will help you minimize the growling and the danger of a follow up bite by utilizing your leadership role and obedience to basic commands. For example, if your dog growls because he is fearful of strangers, your trainer may have you put the dog in a sit by your side. Sit means sit and be quiet, not sit and react or sit and bark and growl. So if the dog growls, he is being corrected for not obeying his sit command; he is not being corrected for being afraid of a stranger. This correction tells the dog two things

- 1) "Sit" means "Sit and be quiet and wait for my cue before you do anything else."
- 2) I am in control of the situation and you don't need to worry about it. I am your leader and I will keep you safe. Follow my command and everything will be fine.

Your trainer will also show you how to re-create situations during training so you can correct your dog and teach him a new behavior. For instance, if your dog growls when you try to take a bone from him, you do not want to assert your leadership by pulling it out of his mouth. That is a sure-fire way to turn his warning growl into a bite. Rather, a trainer will work with you to make sure your dog understands the drop command and that you have done enough training that your dog understands that you are his leader. Before you give your dog a bone, the trainer will make sure you put the training collar and leash on the dog. You will give the drop command and call him to come. When he does come to you, praise exuberantly and reward him with a special treat. If you want to pick up the bone, place him in a sit/stay at a distance from where he left the bone and approach the bone (keeping an eye on your dog). If he breaks the sit/stay, correct him and return him to his spot until you can approach the bone and pick it up without the dog breaking the sit/stay command. Dogs who have food or bone growling issues should be trained with adults only. If there are any children in the house, the dog should be given bones in his crate only, and should be fed safely away from children. Food and bone protection are too dangerous to have children involved in the training.

## **Conclusion**

Developing a good training program for the growl is difficult, but vital. There are many factors to consider, including whether the dog's temperament is contributing to the growling. The consequences of getting the training wrong are significant and sometimes irreparable. Therefore, training should not be attempted without contacting a professional trainer. A good trainer can help you develop a program that is appropriate for your dog and safe for you and your family.

## **About Beth Bradley**

As one of the top professional trainers and competitors in the United States, Beth is committed to improving the lives of dogs and people through training. She teaches group classes and private lessons in basic and advanced obedience, competition dog training, puppy training, Schutzhund training, personal protection, Canine Good Citizenship, and therapy dog training.

Beth also trains and places service dogs for children with autism and custom trains "cross-trained" companion/protection dogs for families and individuals. She consults for shelters in the tri-state area and for New Jersey law enforcement on cases involving canine behavior and temperament.

Beth began studying animal behavior and dog training at age twelve. She has worked and studied under many renowned animal behaviorists and trainers. After graduating from Rutgers University with a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology and Criminal Justice, Beth worked as a New Jersey State Animal Control Officer. In 1989, she founded her own company and has made dog training and consulting her full-time career since 1995. Competing with her dogs, Beth has earned national and international titles, championships, and honors in both Schutzhund and AKC Obedience. In 2003 and 2009, she represented the United States in the FCI World Trials.

Beth is the author of *Real World Dog Training*, and has produced a number of training DVDs and videos. In addition, Beth trains and handles dogs for movies and television, with recent credits including *Board Walk Empire*, the *Batman* franchise, *Damages*, *Blue Bloods*, *The Good Wife*, and *The Blacklist*.

## **CONTACT BETH**

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