



## Homeward Bound Golden Retriever Rescue

### Golden Rule Dog Training

#### Understanding a Growling Dog

Growling is one of the many ways dogs communicate; they growl to let us know they are afraid, feel threatened, in pain, or need us to back away from their possessions or territory. Typically, our first impulse is to run or punish him; it's important not to do either as it can be the first sign of more serious aggression. If you are not comfortable dealing with the situation please contact a dog trainer/behavior consultant for assistance. It's critical to handle a growling dog appropriately from the onset of the behavior.

Dogs that are socialized and have a healthy behavioral balance are more relaxed than others in different circumstances, and are less likely to give a warning growl. Dogs also give warnings in levels; they typically start at a mild and can escalate to a more serious growl if the warning is not respected.

#### Reasons for the GRRR...

Like barking, dog's growl to communicate with other dogs as well as humans, therefore, it's important to pay close attention to what the dog is trying to say. Dogs do what works, so the behavior may have been provoked and is now a habit. For instance, the dog has been successful when defending his food, objects, and territory by acting aggressive. He gets the result he wants as people or other dogs back away, so the growling has been reinforced. There are different intents to growling depending on the situation. Some are purely aggressive, some are due to fear, some are due to pain, and some are happy and heard during play.

**Possessive Behavior** is witnessed in many dogs as they guard their resources (food bowls, resting places, or favorite toys). While some dogs are stressed by specific people, such as, assertive men or loud, fast-moving children, or new things in their environment others are not. Growling can also be due to an unpleasant experience in the past that makes them uneasy and they feel threatened. No matter what the reason, watch your dog closely! Look for the symptoms such as: low level growling, lifting the upper lip, barking, snapping, lunging and even attempting to bite. *See Golden Rule Training Library for more information on what to do for Possessive Behavior.*

**Aggression** is dangerous, but it's also normal dog behavior. Many dogs are bred to protect, but it can also be due to aversive training and learned behavior. Resources are very important to dogs. In fact, dogs can be aggressive in guarding everything they consider their possessions, such as food, bowls, items they steal or find and even their owner. They are also territorial and will defend what they consider to be home.

Stress is the underlying cause in most cases of aggression. It can be one incident or a buildup of individual stressors over time. All dogs can become overwhelmed. For instance, if your dog growls at a person (child pulling the tail, getting in his space, a loud adult, etc.) help them out of the situation! Take

the dog to another room, if outside, take them away from the person, place or thing! It's important to watch your dog's signals and avoid a bad situation.

*Note: If your dog turns down the volume on his growl, giving you a low register, and looks you directly in the eye, he is serious. A stiff tail also indicates aggression; don't get too close, he is giving you cues he may bite if you get too close. Give your dog space if he's exhibiting these behaviors to avoid a bite. **The best advice for aggression is to seek a professional trainer or behaviorist.***

*If this is new behavior it is important to consider two things: has his environment changed and causing stress or is he in pain? A behavior change is easier to see in your own dog since his behavior should be predictable. If you do not see an environmental change, then take your dog to the veterinarian to rule out any medical issues.*

**Pain** is another precursor for growling. Your dog may be reacting to pain or illness. You may notice that he only growls when certain parts of his body are touched. If so, get him to your veterinarian immediately! *(He may also show other symptoms of illness or injury, such as a decline in appetite, recent weight loss, biting or licking specific areas of his body, or hair loss).*

**Fear** is a common reason for growling. Watch your dog when he growls to determine if there are specific people, places or things your dog is afraid of: does he growl at strangers, specific people you know, such as children or men, or when he is in unfamiliar places? If so, his growling is most likely due to fear. Dogs may also growl in uncommon situations that trigger fears, such as during thunderstorms, fireworks, etc. In these cases we have to use counter conditioning and desensitize the dog so he can better cope with what he finds stressful.

In addition to the growling, there may be other symptoms, such as cowering, shaking, heavy panting and/ or drooling. The dog can also exhibit *Fight or Flight* behavior by freezing in place, trying to run away or staying and growling and snarling to scare the dog or human away. Fearful dogs are very capable of biting!

For help with these issues, you may want to seek professional help. See *Golden Rule Training Library* for more information on what to do for Fear Behaviors.

**Territorial** behavior is a natural behavior for dogs as well. Dogs understand possessing valuable resources is vital for survival, even when domesticated. Some dogs are bred for protecting humans and property. A dog that growls at a person or dog that does not belong in his territory, will therefore defend against intruders by growling, barking and snarling. It could be all strangers, some strangers, the mail carrier, delivery person or any other person he feels does not belong on his property. He may also display this behavior inside the home, he may growl over his place on the couch or his spot on the bed. Dog growling occurs any time a dog feels that someone is trespassing on his territory

The tendency to guard people, places, or things can become destructive to the canine-human bond. Some dogs can become aggressive towards their own family in an effort to guard things they consider their possessions. *In these cases get help from a reputable trainer or behavior consultant right away!*

## Do Dog's Growl When they're Happy?

Absolutely! I hear people ask all the time, "is it normal for my dog to make so much noise?" Yes, it is typical. For example, dogs can have a toy in their mouth and tease another dog they are playing with by growling at them as an invitation to play. Dogs exhibit happy growling when playing with other dogs, with their owners and even when playing by themselves with toys. Don't misinterpret these growls as aggressive or even destructive, especially if your dog is cheerfully ripping and decapitated a stuffed toy while growling. These are really happy growls.

We may not always understand what dogs are trying to say, but canines are very astute when communicating to each other. Dogs can tell the difference between a serious bark and a happy bark. In fact, play growls tend to be higher pitched than mean growls; in comparison, serious growls tend to be lower and go on longer.

There are other clues to help determine if your dog is happy; such as, wagging his tail in circles or displaying a play bow (butt in the air and his front legs stretched out front) telling you he's just having fun. If he rolls over on his back and shows you his tummy, or races around the house bounding and hurdling furniture, he's telling you he is happy.

## What to Do For the Growlies

### Never Punish Your Dog for Growling!

Most dog owners react by trying to suppress the growling by scolding or punishing the dog. This is never a good idea! By teaching your dog that growling is not an acceptable behavior, you are taking away his ability to warn you that he may bite. We have all heard stories of how a dog bit for no reason; in many cases, this is because the owners have inadvertently taught their dog not to give a warning growl first.

Be grateful that your dog chose to warn with a growl rather than going straight to a bite. If you punish the growling, you may inhibit the warning growl the next time and the dog may bite without growling first.

Punishment or scolding will not make the dog feel better about his situation. In fact, the opposite can happen. For example, a fearful or anxious dog can become more stressed and be more likely to bite in the future!

Training your dog not to growl is dangerous because it does not mean they won't bite because the antecedent growl is not there. It's better to know your dog is under stress and trying to communicate.

Remember: punishing your dog for growling or snapping = punishing him for warning you that he's close to his maximum threshold and may bite if pushed.

And finally, **NEVER CONFRONT A GROWLING DOG!**

### Putting an End to the Growling

The key to getting a dog to stop growling is not to suppress the growls, but instead determine the root cause of the growl. Once all the possible issues (pain, possession aggression, fear, or territoriality) have been resolved, the dog will no longer need to growl.

First, determine the cause for the growling. Dogs are trying to communicate when they growl and can be a sign of an underlying issue. The most common reasons for growling are due to fear, pain, protecting their territory and or possessions as mentioned above. It's critical to first determine the reason why the dog is growling and deal with those problems. Once the reason is clear, we can work on the issues so the dog doesn't feel the need to growl any longer.

If you're uncomfortable, please call a trainer/behaviorist for help!

## What to do

### Example for Food Guarding

If your dog has a high value resource (such as a bone, pig's ear, favorite toy, your shoe...) and begins to growl as you approach, he is saying, this is MINE stay away!

- If your dog is chewing something she thinks she has to protect, from a distance, approach and toss a piece of chicken or beef nearby. This will let the dog know when they have such a resource, they will get something good. You will have to do this for a few days.
- Try to slowly approach a little at a time and always combine the approach with the yummy treat (I mean really tasty like beef or chicken). This will take many times with many pig's ears or bones. This could take some time.
- Eventually you can work up to trading the chew (pig's ear, rawhide, bone) item for the treat; then give the chew back to her!

**This step is important; it teaches the dog not to be so possessive and stops the growling behavior.** If he is still growling, back up and toss treats again for awhile; he's not ready.

- Remember to go really slow, it could take up to a month of practice.

## Growling at the Kids

### Adapted from Dog Gone Safe

If your child cannot follow directions and/or has got into the habit of being rough with the dog, then the dog and child should be separated until the child has learned to treat the dog with kindness and respect.

- Increase supervision.
- Take your dog to the vet to make sure he is not sick or in pain.
- Seek the advice of a dog behavior specialist who will use positive reinforcement to help teach the dog to change his attitude and to enjoy the company of the child.

Do not assume that the dog will not bite because he hasn't to date. As dogs get older they can become less tolerant of children and their energy. It's important to watch the kids, how they treat your dog and to teach them to be respectful. It's important for the both dog and the kids.

**Please watch your kids when they're around the dog. Never leave them unattended!**

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Sources

Growling Dogs and Training by Amy Bender; About.com

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Possessive and Territorial Aggression in Dogs

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