

Dog Behaviour Explained 3

7. Should dogs should be told off for growling?

Growling is a dog's way of communicating he is uncomfortable in a situation and needs more space. Most dogs will have given more subtle signs of not coping before they escalate to growling (e.g. ears back, looking / moving away, licking lips etc.). If these signs are acknowledged and the dog helped, he should not need to growl. However, if ignored and a growl could escalate to a bite. Try to read your dogs behaviour and help them in situations they find difficult so they do not need to resort to growling or worse. Get help as a soon as possible if you do not understand why your dog growls or how to help him so he doesn't need to display this behaviour. It is important to address these issues early as the more the dog growls and people back off, the more the behaviour is reinforced and becomes learnt.

Telling a dog off for growling does not address the underlying issue and emotions causing the dog to feel the need to growl. Whilst punishment may stop the dog growling in the future, this is just removing the early warning signs and can result in bites with no other indication the dog is feeling so upset. Therefore, dogs should never be told off for growling (punishment should never be used with any aggression), but rather the situation analysed and a proper behaviour modification plan established.

8. Will training prevent or treat behaviour problems?

There are many advantages that come with training e.g. better relationship with owner, increased understanding and two way communicate, confidence, problem solving skills, mental stimulation, physical exercise etc. All of which, combined with the actual training can help prevent some behaviour problems by meeting many of the dog's needs, hence preventing some stress and frustration and giving owners better understanding and ability to guide their dogs behaviour more appropriately. However, there are also many behaviour problems that can occur even in well trained dogs. Most behaviour problems are driven by an emotional response to a situation, usually fear or anxiety; obedience training will not address these emotional responses. Whilst training may be part of a Behaviour Modification Plan, the main focus will usually be on changing emotional responses through classical conditioning techniques.

9. Are dogs are pack animals?

The dog's ancestor, the grey wolf, is a pack animal; they hunt collaboratively, have a pack consciousness and are all involved in raising the young cubs. However, when dogs domesticated themselves, they did so by becoming scavengers around human settlements. As a scavenger, they no longer work closely with either member of the species. Whilst dogs do retain many of their sociable skills, they no longer have a pack mentality. Feral dogs do not form packs, though they may be found in loose transitory groups, they will compete with other dogs for food (wolves are actually less aggressive with each other and share food) and mothers raise pups alone.

Next time, we will be answering:

Will behaviour problems resolve themselves with time?

Do you need to dominate your dog to get him to follow commands?

Do dogs sweat if they get too hot?