

**Why Do Dogs Growl When Playing?**

Most puppies and many adult dogs growl when they are playing with you or with one another. Some dogs even growl when they are playing by themselves or with their favorite toy, which can be amusing to watch. Some pet owners, particularly first-time dog owners, may see two dogs playing and misinterpret the snarling and growling behavior as being aggressive when, in fact, it’s just a natural thing for dogs to do. But why? We know dogs growl to express discomfort and even aggression, so why do they growl when they are playing? And how can you tell the difference?

**Dog Communication**

One of the key ways dogs communicate is through body language. They are masters at communicating complex thoughts and feelings with one another through a tip of the ear or a wag of the tail. They even learn how to read and understand us by our body language. But body language isn’t the only ways dogs communicate with one another; they also use verbal cues, including growling.

**Human Communication**

Have you ever been having a lot of fun at a celebration, gathering or a sporting event and noticed that you are starting to talk louder than normal? As time goes on, you realize you are getting more animated, your gestures are getting bigger, and your voice is getting louder. It’s like the more fun everyone at the event is having, the louder they get. Well, guess what? It’s the same deal with dogs. While they are at play, they tend to growl with delight. Just like us, they are verbally expressing how much fun they are having.

**Puppy Communication**

Have you ever had the pleasure of observing a litter of uncoordinated little puppies all romping around, bumping into each other, and play fighting? If so, you’ve likely heard a variety of little yips and growl sounds accompanying the roughhousing. And if things get out of hand, a good mother dog will put a stop to things. This is an important time in puppy development; it’s through these activities that the puppies learn proper socialization and communication skills, which includes play growling.

**Playtime Communication**

Dogs of all ages love to play. And even if your dog is meeting new dogs and playing with them for the first time, hearing growls is generally not a reason for alarm. If you pay attention, you can easily tell the difference between happy, fun-loving growls and threatening, warning growls.

Our female dog is a good bit older than our male dog. There are times when he wants to play and she’s just not in the mood. She may humor him for a few minutes, and they’ll jump around and wrestle a bit. Their play time is always accompanied by plenty of vocalizations. There will come a point, however, when she has had enough and let me tell you, he knows she means business. Her growls change from soft, higher-pitched, fluid sounds to deeper, sharp, serious tones, and he stops messing with her immediately.

**Escalating Communication**

When unfamiliar dogs enter into play, they oftentimes growl when they are having fun. It’s a good idea to pay attention to their body language to make sure things stay friendly. Ears up or forward, tails up or wagging, and back hair staying smooth usually means everything is okay. If you hear the sounds getting lower and more menacing and you see ears pinning back, tails tucking, hair standing up along the backbone, and eyes averting, things are escalating and the dogs need to be separated.

If you are playing with your puppy and the growls indicate that things are escalating, make him take a break. Some trainers call this grounding your pup. Just stop the play session and issue a sit or down command. Once your pup obeys the command, reward him with praise and a tasty treat. If he’s still got plenty of energy to burn, it’s fine to allow him back up to play whenever you’re ready. These small breaks help socialize your pup, and reinforce the need to keep aggressive play under control.

When my dogs growl while they play, I get a big kick out of thinking it’s their version of heartfelt laughter.