



Behaviour Advice Sheet No.3

Bad Travellers

Excitable and nervous behaviour when travelling by car (barking, jumping from seat to seat, vomiting, whining, etc.) are very inconvenient and lead to a dangerous situation because the driver is distracted. There are several steps you can take to make traveling a more enjoyable experience for both you and your pet.

For your safety when travelling in the car, your dog should be restrained. Nowadays, there are different types of restraining methods available on the market, like carriers or leashes and comfortable harnesses that join to the car seat belts. All of them allow the dog to sit or lie down and also prevent your dog from moving around in the vehicle. Cats should always be carried in a basket, which should be secured into the car by use of the seat belt.

For some dogs restriction of vision by restraining the dog below the window level (in order to impede the vision of traffic lights, people, dogs or simply the blur of objects being passed) can reduce the excitement.

A **systematic desensitisation programme** is one of the most useful methods for controlling this problem in most dogs and you can combine it with the restraining type you prefer. The dog is gradually exposed to the car situation, beginning with such a low level that there isn't any arousal so he can learn that nothing exceptional happens when he goes into the car. At the same time you should reward with praise and small food treats your dog when he or she shows appropriate behaviour.



1- Teach your dog to relax near and then in the car with the engine off. Give praise or treats when he/she is calm. You can also carry out some basic *training in the vehicle* (e.g. sit, stay or down).

Don't try to do too much in one session as concentration declines with time, initial sessions may need to be short (less than 5 min) but frequent (several times a day), and commands should be used as needed in or outside the car.

2- When your dog is used to being quiet, you can start the engine, but without moving the car. Proceed as before, rewarding appropriate behaviour and ignoring any excitement but waiting till he/she calms down. If your dog is aroused or fearful *don't try to reassure* him/her as this reinforces these behaviours.

You can leave the dog in the vehicle for increasing periods of time with the engine running. When your dog accepts the noise of the engine in the car, you can move to the next level.

3- From this stage on, another person is required to drive the car while you ask the dog to stay or sit and reward good behaviour. First time, the car should be moved just a few yards to ensure the dog remains calm. Progressively distance and time are increased. If your dog gets excited the driver should stop and wait for your dog to calm down before proceeding.

4- When your dog is able to travel for a few minutes staying calm, you should begin to stop the car in neutral places. Stops should occur when the dog is quiet; if it happens when he/she is misbehaving then could learn that jumping, barking, etc. cause the car to stop.



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Once the vehicle has stopped, ask your dog to stay quietly in place to earn treats. After a few minutes, driving may resume and the process may be repeated at another location.

5- Once the dog has learned to relax when the car stops, he/she can leave the car ask him to perform some commands and go for a short walk before returning to the car. The number of stops in which your dog is removed from the car is increased gradually.

6- Finally, a pleasure stop is introduced (a run in the park or play). Every car trip should end on a positive note.

When starting a new session, always start some levels lower than the point at which the previous session finished. Do not advance to a higher stage until your dog has completed the previous ones.

For those dogs that get excited when they know that they are going to a particular place (e.g. exercise or play area or to the veterinary clinic), it is useful to practise varying the journeys around that special place.

You can take your dog for a short journey, asking him/her to sit and praise good behaviour. Stop somewhere between your house and the exciting/fearful place if he/she is quiet and go for a walk or play at this alternative place.

You should also go beyond the special place so the end of the journey is not predictable. Reward the appropriate behaviour when passing the special place. Both exercises need repeating many times and should be combined with going to other known and unknown places that don't finish in the clinic or the exercise area.



When your dog has learn to relax during the journey try to approach the particular place, and when you arrive at the point (e.g. the car park), just stop for a minute if your dog has remained calm, give a treat and move on in the car. Later you may go for a walk near the place, making him/her sit every few yards for a reward. Try going nearer the place each time. You should take the dog to a range of different places, so the car journey becomes less predictable.

For cats the systematic desensitization can also take place, it is necessary to reward good behaviors with a favorite treat and a fuss, rather than a walk or a play around their favorite park.

A useful aid when carrying out systematic desensitization in dogs and cats is use of an artificial pheromone, which acts to calm your pet and is proven to reduce signs of stress when traveling, and in the home.

In dogs a product called **DAP** can be used, and is available in the form of a spray which should be applied to a towel and placed in the car 30 minutes prior to travel, or a collar, which the dog should wear at all times.

In cats a product called **Feliway** can be used, and is available in the form of a spray which again should be applied to a towel or bedding in the carrier 30 minutes before travel.

For more information about travel and your pet, or to purchase DAP or Feliway **please contact us at All Animals Veterinary Clinic on 01375 399033.**



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