

Car Travel Training

Many dogs love car travel; it's a chance to be out with their person and see, smell, and listen to the world as it passes by. But there are also dogs that dread the car; if you're even able to get them inside, they may be miserable throughout the ride, trembling, whining, drooling, or even vomiting or trying to escape. At the very least, it's inconvenient to have to coax a reluctant dog into the vehicle every time you need to take them somewhere, and it can even become a safety issue if you need to move your dog quickly in an emergency. Fear is usually at the root of a dog's refusal or reluctance to get in a car; they may have had a previous negative experience, or they are just afraid of the unfamiliar – the car's size, its various entry points, its sounds, its movements. So, our goal is to turn their negative association with the car into a positive one.



What proximity to the car can your dog tolerate?

Desensitizing a dog means that we introduce them in increments to the thing that triggers them – in this case, the car that triggers their fear – in such a gradual way that they are able to build tolerance and even acceptance of it. Where do you start this? By determining their current degree of discomfort: For example, if your dog won't walk within 4 feet of the car, then start the training farther away, maybe at 10 feet, and over subsequent sessions slowly close the gap. If your dog will approach the car but puts on the brakes when you open the back door, then you'll start at the point *before* you open the door. Each dog's desensitization training will begin at a different stage.

Pair each step of training with a pleasurable reinforcer

Once we've established where to begin desensitization, we add in counter-conditioning, which means we pair each step of training with something pleasurable, such as fabulous treats or playing tug with a toy, to change the dog's emotional response. So, let's say we've established that they tolerate the car from 10 feet away. Then we'll walk up and down the lawn or at the bottom of the drive at that distance, giving them treats or playing little games with them and making them feel comfortable and relaxed. You may have to do this over a few sessions before moving a little closer to the car, then eventually reach the point where they can feel relaxed being right beside it. Read your dog's body language at each stage; if they're still able to play and take treats and have a loose body posture, they are ready to advance; if they stop taking treats or playing and have a tense body posture, tucked tail etc., you've moved too fast and you need to return to a point at which the dog feels comfortable again. (Please see our info sheet [Canine Communication](#) for more details on body language.)

Encouraging your dog to get inside

You might have a dog that is okay with the door being opened but won't jump in. Again, we aim to make a positive association with going inside so that crossing the threshold no longer seems a scary thing. Put a trail of treats across the seat all the way to the far side so the dog can't



access all the food just by stretching their neck into the car. You can put a stuffed Kong or a bowl of food at the far side as well, so that when they get in and finish the treats, they've got more goodies to keep them inside longer. If the car has a hatch entrance, do the same thing with a treat trail leading into the car interior. You may need to repeat training at this stage several times till your dog is happy to jump inside and you can close the door.

Getting your dog used to car sounds

Once this hurdle is crossed, you might have to work on desensitizing and counter-conditioning (DS/CC) your dog to the sounds of starting the car, such as the key turning the ignition and the engine revving. As you turn on the car and remain in "park", counter condition the dog to the noise by tossing treats into the back or holding out a wooden spoon with peanut butter for them to lick. You may have to repeat this stage several times until your dog displays no anxiety when the car is started.

Going for a drive

Finally, you can advance to DS/CC-ing your dog to the actual drive: start small, just going down the driveway and back; then down the street and back, around the block, and so on. Give them a long-lasting stuffed Kong or a bowl of special food/treats so you can keep your eyes on the road. When your dog seems comfortable going around the block, take them to a favourite nearby park so the driving experience includes the pleasure of a walk. And over time, you can build up to longer distances and destinations.

Use safety equipment

Car travel training should also include acclimating your dog to a car harness or, even better, a crate. It is simply not safe to drive with an unsecured dog in the event you need to slam on the brakes or have a collision.

How long will all this desensitization and counter-conditioning take? It depends entirely on the level of your dog's fear of the car. Pack your patience and look forward to the day when they leap into the car in happy anticipation of an outing with you.

References

<https://www.akc.org/expertadvice/training/teachyourdogtorideinthecar>

<https://www.whole-dog-journal.com/behavior/helpforadogwithcarphobia>

