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## **Training Your Dog For Vehicle Rides**

Many dogs love rides in the car. Whether it's because they enjoy watching things through the window, feeling the rushing breeze on their face or because car rides (usually) take them to fun places like the park, many dogs get excited about going in the car with their owners. Other dogs feel very differently; the loud engine may seem scary, the motion of the car may make them nauseous or feel unsteady on their feet, or they may have had a previous negative experience in a vehicle (e.g. having previously hurt themselves when the car stopped suddenly or only going into the vehicle to go to the vet clinic). These dogs may constantly drool inside the car, bark uncontrollably or have to be dragged into the vehicle unwillingly. Fortunately, there are ways to change a dog's reaction and comfort level while inside a moving vehicle which not only improves their experience but yours as well.

### **Counter Conditioning and Desensitization**

Some people will try to train their dogs for vehicles by placing them in the vehicle and driving them around until they realize that it's not such a big deal. This training is called "flooding" and, unfortunately, it does not often train a dog to be more comfortable in the car. It may decrease some of the problem behaviors (pacing, barking, etc) but this is due to them realizing that they cannot escape the fearful situation regardless of what they do (termed "learned helplessness"). They are not any more comfortable being in the vehicle but they have learned that they're trapped regardless.

Fortunately, there is a different training that does change their underlying emotional response to the car and this is called counter-conditioning and desensitization. Counter-conditioning is the process where we train the dog to have a positive reaction to something that they previously had a negative reaction to. Desensitization involves gradually exposing them to stimuli they dislike and using positive re-enforcement to reward their courage (Note: this is different from flooding in that we start with a very low level of stimulation and gradually work our way up whereas flooding exposes them to the trigger, in full, all at once). Using this-two-prong training, we have the best chance of creating a dog who wags their tail when approaching a vehicle and can calmly enjoy the ride.

Some things to keep in mind with this training:

- This training takes time, usually several weeks. If you have a very reactive dog, then it can take longer. However, it is very important to be patient and take your time as you cannot rush this training if you want it to work.
- Training is best done in short, frequent sessions (5-15min sessions multiple times a day). Shorter sessions prevent frustration and lack of focus (both from you and your dog) while more frequent sessions are better for learning and retaining trained behaviour.
- You want to keep your dog calm during training. If your dog becomes overwhelmed and stressed during training, then give them a reward to end on a positive note and end the session. Do not start another session until they have had time to calm down. Try to start at a lower level of stimulation next time.
- Positive re-enforcement is key! This training uses rewards and lots of them to create positive reactions so you need to find out what rewards work for your dog. Often this is food but it can also be attention, grooming time, or playing a favorite game.
  - If you use food, try to break it into small pieces (usually the size of a pea or slightly larger) as this allows you to treat more frequently without overfeeding.
  - Rank what your dog loves so you can offer high and lower-value treats. High-value treats should only be used for training new skills (this makes it extra motivating) while lower-values rewards (like their kibble) can be used to re-enforce well known behaviours.
- Avoid punishment. Even if your dog is unruly in the car, punishment is unlikely to help and can often make the behaviour worse, even escalating it to aggressive behaviour.
- Avoid vehicle rides when not training. The goal of desensitization is to slowly work them up to a full car ride. This works best if we can stick to that gradual climb. A full-blown car experience can often set your training efforts back so do your best to avoid them if possible until they finish their training. If a vehicle ride is needed and does set your training back, do not despair. You'll just have to start at a previous level and work from there.

### **Vehicle Training:**

The first thing to do is to gauge how reactive your dog is and what about the vehicle they react to specifically (these are called "triggers"). Some dogs have particular triggers you will need to work on (such as the sound of the doors locking or the engine starting). Every training plan will vary based on the individual dog so this handout will go over 3 different example cases to give you an idea of the process.

- Determine when your dog starts showing signs of anxiety (whining, lip-licking, restlessness etc). You want to find out exactly when they start becoming uncomfortable as this will be our starting point for training.
  - Dog 1 gets anxious as soon as she and her owner approach the car.
  - Dog 2 gets anxious when the doors open and lock.
  - Dog 3 is fine until the engine starts.

- Once you have your starting point, your beginning sessions should consist of repeatedly exposing them to this low level of stimulation and rewarding them immediately after. We are trying to change their association from negative (the trigger means getting into the scary vehicle) to positive (the trigger means they are about to be rewarded).
  - Dog 1 is walked down towards the vehicle. As soon as the dog notices the vehicle, they are rewarded and walk back to the house. This is repeated a few times during the session.
  - Dog 2 is brought next to the door. The door is opened a little or unlocked and they are immediately rewarded. They are then taken away from the vehicle. This is repeated a few times during the session.
  - Dog 3 is taken into the car. The engine is briefly turned over (but not fully started) and the dog is immediately rewarded. They are then taken out of the vehicle. This is repeated a few times during the session unless it is too stressful (then only once).
- Repeat these initial training sessions several times until your dog is showing no signs of stress or discomfort (better yet if they are happily awaiting you to interact with the car). Now you can increase the level of intensity slightly and repeat the training. If the new level is overwhelming for them, then reduce to the previous level for a few sessions. Try a smaller increase in intensity after they are doing well with the previous level again.
  - Dog 1 is walked down a few feet closer to the vehicle before being rewarded.
  - Dog 2 is kept next to the car while her owner opens and closes the doors fully or unlocks and then locks the doors, rewarding immediately afterwards.
  - Dog 3 is brought inside while the engine is fully started, rewarding and then immediately shutting the engine off.
- Once your dog is doing well with this new level, you can increase slightly again and repeat the training process. Keep this process going (train until comfortable, slightly increase, repeat) until you have the entire car ride process worked out. Reward previous steps with lower value rewards and new steps with high value rewards. Think of the training like climbing stairs. Each step has to be easy enough for them to achieve and with each success we get closer to the final goal (a relaxing and enjoyable car trip). This will look different for each dog.
  - Dog 1 is brought closer to the vehicle in 5-foot increments until she is next to the car. Then she has to go through the same training that dogs 2 and 3 had to go through to get used to the sounds of the doors and the engine. She also needed additional training with the car in motion, taking very short trips (starting with just going up and down the driveway) and then slowly increasing the length of the car trip. Her training took the longest.
  - Dog 2 practiced with the doors being opened and closed both with her outside the vehicle and then inside (similarly with the sounds of the doors locking). She then had to go through similar training as dog 3 as she also had a fear of the engine.
  - Dog 3 was kept in the car while the engine was running (but not moving) for longer periods of time (starting with 10s, then 30s, then 1 min, then 5min) until she no longer showed any reaction to the engine (except for a perk of the ears in anticipation of a

reward). This was the only part of the car ride that she reacted to so her training took the shortest amount of time.

### **Medications:**

Medications should be considered under two main conditions:

If your dog excessively drools, licks their lips and especially if they vomit while in the vehicle, talk to your regular veterinarian about anti-nausea medications as these can help. If your dog is less than 1 year old, then your veterinarian may choose not to use medication as young dogs often get motion sick until their inner ear fully matures (this part of the body is involved with balance).

If your dog is severely anxious in the vehicle or is struggling with other behaviour problems, talk to your regular veterinarian as they may require behaviour medications to help. Sometimes these medications are taken in the short term to allow proper training and then stopped when they have been fully trained. Other times they are required life-long to maintain a more relaxed life. Your regular veterinarian may also suggest a behaviour consult with Dr. Josh Cousins if appropriate.

**Conclusion:** Through patient training and sometimes medication, many animals can be taught how to ride comfortably and calmly inside the vehicle, improving the experience for both of you.