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## **REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION**

TODAY OUR BREED EXPERT looks at why some collies develop more issues or phobias about car travel:

### **COLLIES AND CAR TRAVEL - WHAT GOES WRONG AND WHY?**

As most of us are already aware, Border collies can differ so much as individuals in their reactions to different sensory experiences, including car travel. And if we wind right back to the beginning of all these differences in attitude, and reaction, they invariably start with the earliest mental associations the dog made with them - i.e. more negative or positive – and what was done at the optimum time to help them overcome any initial anxiety they may have had about the experience.

Readers of my books will be aware of how critical I see the process of earliest mental association in collies. In terms of what the dog gets exposed to and when, and the connection they make with the experience that then gets committed to memory. For if you do not sufficiently understand this process, you cannot better control it in your dog, and ensure that more negative reactions to future everyday experiences, like car travel, do not get more progressively ingrained in their minds. Which in turn will then dictate their reaction to the same experience whenever they encounter it again.

### **MORE EXCITED REACTIONS**

Collies can become more agitated car passengers for a number of reasons – the first just being pure excitement, as they anticipate the route to a favourite walk, or imminently arriving there. Which in turn may trigger lots of whining or barking or jumping around. This in turn can not only be intensely irritating, but also quite dangerous, in terms of the level of distraction it may cause any driver.

And if you do not get on top of this kind of more excessive emotional response, early on, it only gets worse and worse via repetition, and similarly the dog gets ever poorer at mastering better emotional self-control in general.

Thus the best way to deal with it is to first teach your dog the ‘quiet’ command – covered before on this page – and then make them realise their walk will never start until they are first quiet in the car when you ask them to be. You can also immediately stop the car - as soon as it is safe to do so - the instant your dog barks/whines in the car, and refuse to continue driving again until your dog is quiet again, as asked, and settles down on your command.

If you do this very calmly but persistently each and every time your dog barks in the car it will eventually stop. Such retraining can take a lot of time and patience but the reward

is a future full of quieter travel and a more emotionally stable dog. If dogs continue to bark excitedly it means the retraining is still not complete.

### **MORE FEARFUL ANXIOUS REACTIONS**

If, on the other hand, you have a dog who shows significant reluctance to get in a car and becomes highly anxious and distressed throughout any car journey then clearly this is because they have made highly negative mental associations with this experience in the past.

One of the commonest reasons why this kind of negative mental connection takes root in the minds of young dogs is because no one made car travel a more pleasant, or far less worrying, experience for them instead, much earlier on in their lives. Which is just so vital to do.

For on a sensory level, car travel just has so much to trouble the developing collie mind - in terms of all the different noises, vibration, sense of confinement, and the dog's sudden loss of control over their own movements which may also prompt nausea.

Even worse than this, so often a puppy's very first experience of car travel is when they are taken away from their mother, and all that is familiar and safe to them, and driven off to a strange new home, which adds even more trauma and negative mental connections to the whole experience. And this is how the seeds of future car phobias so often get sown.

### **MAKING CAR TRAVEL LESS SCARY**

My own puppies begin going out in the car – in a special safe carrier – from about 4 to 5 weeks of age. Moreover I take each puppy in a litter out individually, so that one never gets contaminated by any more negative reactions from another.

At first they may be highly anxious or whine, which is entirely to be expected when faced with such an unusual new experience or sensation. But they literally just get driven round the block and back home again every day. After less than a week car travel then becomes pretty much old hat to them, and there is no anxiety anymore. The experience has become just a normal part of their everyday lives.

I would urge any breeder to do the same with puppies this age – and at a stage in their lives when they are most adaptable to new experiences – to minimise any future more negative associations with car travel. Keeping puppies in a covered carrier, or their eyes kept below window level, will also minimise the chances of them becoming car sick.

Similarly, as soon as you get any new puppy home, ensure you take them out in the car twice a day, every day, just for routine short runs. Do not wait until your puppy has finished their jabs. You can even feed your puppy regularly in the car or put their favourite toys and blankets in there, so it becomes a virtual home from home.

The more early positive experience your puppy has of being in a car the less likely they are to develop anxiety about car travel later on.

### **PRE-EXISTING PHOBIAS**

Dogs who have already developed severe phobias about car travel need to be retrained with great patience, in terms of far more steadily building up their increased ease, or tolerance, towards everything about the car travelling experience that previously worried them.

Clicker training can be very helpful in this regard, but you must only work in very small steps the dogs can cope with. Beginning with your dog feeling comfortable about getting nearer to a car, to travelling in one free of distress. There may be so many smaller steps of confidence building inbetween that have to be completed, and which you may have tried to rush your dog through in the past before they were fully ready. A far greater understanding of why your dog finds particular aspects of car travel so frightening or stressful is also important, so that you are always able to work more on their wavelength, in terms of changing behaviour.

Meanwhile far more on car travel and training dogs to be happier in the car appears in BOOK TWO in my BREED APART trilogy, ESSENTIAL LIFE SKILLS & LEARNING:

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