

BowWOW

Facts, observations and musings about Our Best Friends

Road Hard

“Wanna go for a ride?!!” Most dogs charge the door, tails wagging, woofing happily. It’s an opportunity for adventure! a walk in a new place! new smells! perhaps a drive-thru treat! But not for Pierce. At the sound of “...ride?”, Pierce heads under the bed in the far back room.

From the time he was a tiny puppy, Pierce, now an adult, has managed to bring new definition to the words “got sick in the car”.

Carsickness is more often the result of fear and stress, rather than motion. In Pierce’s case, because he went directly from his safe, familiar kennel at the shelter to the family sedan, he saw the car as a big, scary, monster. Pups that haven’t been acclimated to cars may be afraid of the sound of the engine, feel “trapped” in an unfamiliar moving box, and terrified at the sight of the world whizzing past the windows. They may also have trouble balancing as the car shimmies side to side. In addition to all that, an older dog knows the car is most likely going to take him somewhere unpleasant. Pierce now associates a car ride with a trip to the vet and will slime the upholstery before he’s out of the driveway.

The solution is a very simple step-by-step process of desensitization and counter conditioning, even for an older dog like Pierce. Taking your time making sure your dog is physically and emotionally secure is the key to assuring your dog will be a happy and tidy passenger.

Step One: Meet the Car

Have your dog slowly approach the car. If he shows anxiety, move far enough away for him to regain his composure. Try it again; again move in slowly. This may take multiple tries on multiple days. Make the training sessions short and casual. When he can come close to the car without coming unglued, treat him and praise him immediately. He will begin to associate car with something pleasant.

Step Two: Getting In

Once Pierce can stand next to the car without quaking, open the door and invite him to get in. Encourage him to join you, offer a treat. Make it his choice. Once he willingly gets in the car, sit with him a few moments with the door open so he doesn’t fret about being “trapped”. Take him back out and repeat the process. Treat and praise when he is comfortable.

Step Three: Assigned Seats

Now that Pierce is jumping happily in and out of the car, it is time to show him where he will sit. Assigning him an official place will make him feel safer. If you otherwise use a crate, you can invite him into his “traveling compartment” with a chew bone or stuffed Kong for inducement. If you use a traveling restraint, now is the time to introduce it. His official travel place may also be as simple as “his” towel on the back seat. Invite Pierce to sit with you in his “spot” and hang out for a few minutes. Close the door. When he is comfortable, treat him and praise lavishly.

Step Four: Power Up

Once Pierce is sitting happily on his “spot” in the car with the doors closed, it is time to start the engine. Let it run a few minutes. Treat and praise if Pierce keeps his cool. If he begins to yawn, drool or show other signs of anxiety, turn off the engine. Repeat another day.

Step Five: The Short Trip

Note: do not use treats during this step.

Once Pierce knows where to sit and is comfortable with the engine running, it is time to go for a very short ride to a very happy place. Think about how far you have been able to drive before your dog chucks, and then drive less than that distance. Get out and engage in a rewarding activity such as a walk or ball play. Repeat daily. While you are desensitizing your dog to the car, avoid trips to the “bad” places.

Before a training ride, make sure your dog has an empty stomach, has had moderate exercise and has pottied. A few drops of Rescue Remedy before the ride will help settle his nerves, some cooled peppermint or ginger tea will settle his tummy afterwards. If your dog still has trouble with carsickness after desensitizing him, you might want to chat with your vet.

BowWOW! Is a production of Tracie Korol and wholeDog.

Want more information? Have a question? Send a note to Tracie at letstalk@wholedog.biz , visit www.wholedog.biz or give a call to 846-0804.