

## Travelling in the Car

Family trips in the car can be fun and enjoyable. They can also be quickly spoiled for everybody when children whine, complain, refuse to wear their seat-belt, fight or tease each other. Some children can manage short trips around town, but become difficult on longer journeys. Others are difficult every time they get into the car. Misbehaviour in the car is stressful for parents and can be dangerous if the driver is distracted. This tip sheet gives some suggestions to help you teach your preschooler to behave responsibly in the car.

Teaching new behaviour and skills takes time and effort at first, but will make travelling in the car easier and more enjoyable in the long term. To make a start, plan a series of short car trips lasting about 5 minutes. Try to keep these trips to quiet streets, at times when you are not in a hurry. Build up to longer trips as your child learns to behave in the car.

### WHY DO CHILDREN MISBEHAVE IN THE CAR?

Preschoolers may find car travel boring. It can seem to them that the trip takes forever, particularly if they have nothing to do. When children have little to do, they are more likely to misbehave.

If children are ignored when they behave responsibly, and only get attention when they misbehave, problems are likely to occur more often.

It is much harder for parents to deal with problem behaviour in the car than it is at home. While driving, parents may overlook problem behaviour because they have to concentrate on the road.

Sometimes parents avoid taking their children out because they misbehave in the car. If children are not given opportunities to learn how to behave responsibly on car trips, it is likely that the problem behaviour will continue.

### HOW TO HELP PREVENT PROBLEMS IN THE CAR

#### ▼ Maintain Your Child's Routine

If possible, plan your trip for a time when your child is most likely to enjoy it. Avoid disrupting usual sleep or meal times as your child is likely to be tired or hungry.

#### ▼ Prepare Your Child Ahead of Time

Talk to your child about safety while travelling in the car. Explain why it is important for the driver to be able to

concentrate on the road and why it is important to wear a seat-belt. Set a good example and always wear your own seat-belt when you are travelling in the car.

Before leaving home, tell your child where you will be going and how long the trip will take. Answer any questions about the trip.

#### ▼ Explain the Rules

Decide on two or three simple rules for car travel and discuss them with your child. After a while your preschooler will be able to say what the rules are. Ideally, rules should tell your child what to do rather than what not to do. Here are some examples:

- Keep your seat-belt on.
- Use a quiet voice.
- Keep your hands and feet to yourself.

Before you drive off, ask your child to say the rules — *So what rules do you have to remember while we are driving in the car?* Praise them if they tell you. If your child does not say the rules, calmly remind them.

If there were problems last time you were travelling in the car, briefly and calmly describe one rule your child forgot to follow — *Last time we were driving in the car, you forgot our rule about keeping*

*your legs down.* Tell your child what you would like them to do differently this time — *Today, let's see if you can sit nicely and keep your legs down.*

#### ▼ Talk About Rewards

At first you may like to reward your child for following the rules. Tell your child what they can earn if they follow the rules while you are travelling in the car. Suggested rewards include a special activity or a small treat when you arrive at your destination.

#### ▼ Talk About Consequences

Decide ahead of time exactly how to deal with problem behaviour. Tell your child what will happen if the rules are broken. Explain how you will use quiet time and stopping the car (see over).

#### ▼ Plan Some Activities

Plan some special activities or games for the trip, such as audio tapes of children's songs or stories, or playing 'I spy' games like spotting horses or red cars. You may like to keep a special bag of activities in the car for your child to play with. Choose toys, such as soft toys and paperback books, that would be safe if an accident occurred.

### HOW TO MANAGE CAR TRIPS

#### ▼ Keep Your Child Busy

Prompt your child to start an activity before you set off. As you drive, talk to your child and ask them questions. Point out things of interest along the way. Introduce new toys or activities regularly to keep your child interested.

#### ▼ Encourage Desirable Behaviour

From time to time during the trip, praise your child for following the rules — *Jodie, you are doing very well at sitting still in your seat with your seat-belt on today.* Help your child get started on a new activity if they are losing interest in what they are doing. Do this before



problems occur. If the trip is more than an hour long, stop and offer a snack when your child is behaving well. On long trips, schedule breaks at regular intervals so that your child can get out, stretch their legs, run around and go to the toilet. Drivers also need to take regular breaks.

### ▼ Use Planned Ignoring for Minor Problem Behaviour

If your child is whining, talking loudly or yelling at you, tell your child that you are not going to talk to them — *Madeleine, I'm not going to answer you until you speak quietly.* Pay no attention to your child until they are quiet or speak properly. When you first try this, be prepared for the problem behaviour to get worse before it gets better. If you ignore the whining or yelling for a while and then give in and answer, you will teach your child that they need to whine or yell louder and longer to get your attention. As soon as your child is behaving well, praise them.

### ▼ If Misbehaviour Occurs, Tell Your Child What To Do

If your child misbehaves or breaks a rule, act straight away. Tell your child what to stop doing — *Peter, stop leaning on your sister.* Tell them what to do instead — *Stay on your side of the car.* Praise your child if they do as you ask.

### ▼ Back Up Your Instruction With Quiet Time

If your child does not do as you have asked or breaks the rule again, use quiet time. Tell your child what they have done wrong and the consequence — *You have not done as Daddy asked, now it's quiet time. Sit still and be quiet.* Quiet time involves removing your attention from your child and having them be quiet for a short time. Continue to drive but do not give your child any attention. Make sure that everyone in the car is quiet. Tell your child they must be quiet for 2 minutes before quiet time will finish.

If the problem behaviour continues, check that it is safe and pull the car over to the side of the road. Tell your child why you are stopping — *You have not done as I asked, now I'm stopping the car.* Stop the car and tell your child to sit quietly. Remind your child that they must be quiet for 2 minutes before you can continue driving. Remove all attention. Do not talk to or look at your child.

### ▼ Continue the Car Trip

When your child has been quiet for 2 minutes, drive on. As soon as your child

follows the rules again, praise them. If misbehaviour occurs again, use quiet time again. You may need to repeat quiet time several times before your child stops misbehaving.

### ▼ Review the Car Trip

When you get to your destination, tell your child what you liked about their behaviour during the car trip — *Craig, it was great to see you keep your seat-belt on for the whole trip today.* If your child followed the rules, praise them and give them the reward you agreed on before the trip. If problems occurred, do not give the reward. Briefly and calmly describe one rule your child forgot to follow — *You forgot our rule about using your quiet voice.* Set a goal for your next car trip — *Next time we go for a drive let's see if you can remember to talk quietly so Mummy can concentrate on driving.*

### POINTS TO REMEMBER

If your child is out of their seat-belt, you must stop the car on the side of the road as soon as it is safe to do so. Make sure that your child's seat-belt is fastened, and fits snugly and comfortably, before you drive on. It is against the law for a child to be unrestrained in a moving motor vehicle. If you are unsure whether the type of restraint you are using is appropriate for your child's size and weight, contact your local Department of Main Roads or automobile breakdown club.

Sometimes it is not possible or safe to stop the car to deal with problem behaviour. If your child is crying or being noisy but is still secured in their seat, you may need to keep driving. Ignore the problem behaviour. At these

**FOR FURTHER HELP** See the Positive Parenting booklet for more information on positive parenting strategies. If you have any questions or have tried these strategies and are concerned about your child's progress, contact the service where you were given this tip sheet.

Triple P is a parenting program developed by Professor Matthew R. Sanders and colleagues in the Parenting and Family Support Centre, School of Psychology at The University of Queensland with funding support from Queensland Health, Victorian Department of Human Services, Health Department of Western Australia, and National Health and Medical Research Council.

Written by Karen M.T. Turner, Matthew R. Sanders, Carol Marke-Dadds  
© 1996 The University of Queensland  
Reprinted 2008  
Printed by Hang Tai Printing Co. Ltd.

NOT TO BE COPIED OR REPRODUCED

times relaxation may be helpful for you. Try taking some slow, deep breaths, say the word *Relax* to yourself, or listen to music.

If your child did not do as you asked during the trip, you can use delayed time-out when you get to your destination. Say something like — *You did not do as you were asked in the car, now you must go to time-out.* Time-out involves taking your child to an uninteresting but safe room or space and having them be quiet for a short time. Tell your child they must be quiet for 2 minutes before they can come out of time-out. Give this reminder even though your child might be upset or angry. When your child has been quiet for 2 minutes let them out of time-out. Watch for them behaving well and praise them as soon as possible.

### KEY STEPS

- At first, plan some short car trips.
- Try not to disrupt your child's usual sleeping and eating routines.
- Remind your child of the rules for travelling in the car.
- Talk about rewards and consequences.
- Make sure your child has interesting things to do while you are travelling.
- Praise and reward your child for following the rules.
- Use planned ignoring for minor problem behaviour.
- Act immediately if misbehaviour occurs.
- Tell your child what to do.
- Back up your instruction with quiet time while driving or stop the car.
- Before stopping the car, make sure that it is safe to pull over and stop.
- Continue to drive.
- Review the trip with your child.

As your child learns to behave responsibly on car trips, you will not need to remind them of the rules, rewards and consequences each time you travel in the car. Even though you will discuss the rules less often, they will still apply. Use consequences consistently if the rules are broken. Gradually make rewards less predictable by giving them every now and then. Continue to praise your child for behaving responsibly on car trips.