

## ***Positive Parenting of Preschoolers***

# ***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. Misbehaviour in the car is stressful for parents and can be dangerous if the driver is distracted. Children need to sit still and talk quietly while in the car so the driver can concentrate and everyone can enjoy the trip. This tip sheet gives some suggestions to help you teach your preschooler how 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. Some children can manage short trips around town, but become difficult on longer journeys. Others are difficult every time they get into the car. It is much harder for parents to deal with problem behaviour in the car than it is at home. While they are driving, parents have to concentrate on their children and on the road.

## **Before the Trip**

### ***Set Aside Time To Teach Your Child***

Plan a series of short car trips with your preschooler. Do not stop taking your child out because they are difficult in the car. Give them even more opportunities to learn how to be a good passenger. Start with short trips (about five minutes) in quiet streets, at times when you are not in a hurry. Build up to longer trips as your child learns how to behave 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 mealtimes.

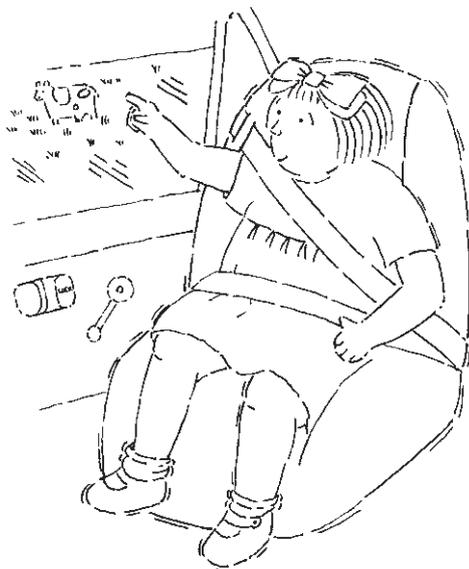
### ***Prepare Your Child for the Trip***

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 for Travelling in the Car***

Decide on two or three simple rules for car travel and explain them to 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:

- Stay in your car seat.
- Keep your seat belt on.
- Use a quiet voice.



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

### ***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 behave well on the trip. Suggested rewards include special activities 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).

### ***Have Some Activities Available***

Select some special activities or games for the trip, such as audio tapes of children's songs or stories. You may also like to keep a bag of activities in the car for your child to play with. Keep them only for car travel and introduce new toys or activities regularly to keep your child's interest. Prompt your child to start an activity before you set off. Consider toys, such as soft toys and paperback books, that would be safe should an accident occur.

## **While You Are Driving**

### ***Keep Your Child Busy***

As you drive, talk to your child and ask them questions. Point out things of interest along the way. You may like to play 'I spy' games, such as spotting horses or red cars.

### ***Praise Your Child for Behaving Well***

From time to time during the trip, praise your child for following the rules. If the trip is over 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. Say something like—*From now on, 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, you will teach your child that they need to whine or yell louder and longer to get your attention.

## **If More Serious Misbehaviour Occurs, Act Immediately**

If your child breaks a rule, act straight away. Tell your child what you want them to stop doing—*Peter, stop pushing your sister* or *Caitlin, stop undoing your seat belt.* Tell them what to do instead—*Stay on your side of the car* or *Leave your seat belt on please.* Praise your child if they do as you ask. Prompt your child to start a new activity—*Get out your sticker book if you want something to do.*

## **Use Quiet Time in the Car**

If the problem continues, 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 that they must be quiet for two 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 before you can continue driving. Remove all attention. Do not talk to your child or look at them. When they have been quiet for one minute, drive on. As soon as your child follows the rules again, praise them.

## **After the Trip**

### **Reward Your Child**

If your child followed the rules, praise them and give the reward you agreed on before the trip.

### **Review the Trip**

Praise your child's successes. If necessary, briefly and calmly describe one rule your child forgot to follow and

set a goal for the next trip—*Craig, it was great to see you keep your seat belt on for the whole trip today. 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 seatbelt, 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 seatbelt 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 about whether the type of restraint you are using is appropriate for your child's size and weight, contact VicRoads or the RACV.

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 times relaxation may be helpful for you. Try taking some slow, deep breaths, saying the word relax to yourself or listening to music.

If your child did not do as you asked during the trip, you can use 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 two minutes before they can come out of time-out. Give this reminder even though your child might be upset or angry.

## **Key Steps**

- Try not to disrupt your child's usual sleeping and eating routines.
- Remind your child of the rules for travelling in the car.
- Make sure your child has interesting things to do while you are travelling.
- Praise and reward your child for following the rules.
- Use quiet time while driving or stop the car when a problem occurs.
- Before stopping your car, make sure that it is safe to pull over and stop.
- Review the trip with your child.

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



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