

Driving You Crazy

Dr. Matt Sanders

School holidays are a great opportunity for families to spend time together, especially when you all head off in the car to your favorite vacation spot. A touch optimistic, you say? Of course a family car trip is supposed to be fun, but it can be spoiled when children start to whine, complain, fight or tease each other in the back seat.

Young children often find car trips boring, particularly if they have nothing to do. It may seem to them that time is passing so slowly that the trip will never end. And when the words “Are we there yet?” begin to ring ever frequently in your own ears you may also begin to wonder if you have entered some hellish time-warp.

And it’s not just the stress on the driver that makes it undesirable for children to misbehave in the car. It can easily become dangerous, especially if you are distracted from driving while attempting to sort out a noisy argument between your children. Some young children may also object to wearing their seat belt in the car — a situation which cannot be ignored.

So if you are heading off these holidays, plan ahead of time how you’re going to deal with any problem behavior. Explain to your children the need to be responsible in the car because of safety concerns. Tell them about the trip, how long it will take, and where you are going.

Decide on two or three simple rules such as “use a quiet voice,” and “keep your hands and feet to yourself.” Ask your child to repeat back to you these rules so that you both know what is expected. And remember to set a good example by wearing your own seat belt.

Before you set off, start your child in an activity. As you drive, talk to them and ask them questions. Point out things of interest along the way and regularly introduce new toys or activities to keep them interested. Try playing some audio tapes of children’s songs or stories, or play that old favorite, “I spy.”

For long car trips, make sure you include regular rest breaks to give your child a chance to get out, run around, and go to the toilet. Offer them a snack when they have been behaving well and help them to get started on a new activity if you notice them losing interest in what they are doing.

Remember if you’re packing a little bag of activities to amuse your child in the car to include soft toys and paperback books — things that won’t become harmful missiles in the event of a sudden stop or accident.

For younger children, learning how to behave in the car is a skill you need to teach them just like learning to dress themselves. A series of short five-minute trips around quiet streets at times

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Healthy children—body, heart and mind.

when you are not in a hurry is a good way to introduce your child to the car. Remember to praise good behavior often, particularly in the early stages.

With older children be prepared to stop the car if your children are misbehaving, wait until peace is restored, and then continue the journey. Sometimes it is not possible to deal with problem behavior in the car right away, especially if you are driving in hazardous conditions. In these cases, if your child is crying or being noisy but is still safely secured in their seat it is best to ignore the behavior. .

Dr. Matthew Sanders is a clinical psychologist at the University of Queensland in Australia and founder of the Triple P – Positive Parenting Program.

For local resources on Positive Parenting support for common behavior issues such as tantrums, whining, disobedience, bedtime problems and more contact Raise & Shine at 707-463-1233 or visit www.raiseandshine.org for a schedule of free workshops, classes and private consultations in your area.

