

# Developing Driver Control

## It's a dogs life behind the wheel

Following an emotive workshop with Kent & Medway Road Safety Partnership I was searching for some inspiration on how to reduce UK KSI (Killed and Seriously Injured) statistics in 17-24 year olds. Evidence seems to show that the highly disproportionate statistics (8% of drivers being involved in 25% of KSI collisions) are in part down to:

Thrill seeking

Inexperience

Competitive nature

Undeveloped frontal lobes - causing issues identifying danger

Parental and Social inconsistency - "Do as I say, not as I do"

Hormonal levels

During this investigating I discovered an article by Dee Ganley, a behavioural consultant - for dogs! (<http://deesdogs.com>) It was entitled "Lowering Arousal: How to Train Impulse Control". (Exerts printed in blue below) It was fascinating, and really opened my eyes. Based on Dee's insight, I have put together the following to provoke some thought and challenge a few ideas. As always, I welcome feedback - from human and animal specialists alike. I apologise now to Dee for reclaiming our common language and Anglicising the American spellings!

When I attended the workshop I spoke with a number of fellow ADIs (Approved Driving Instructors) who had also been shaken by the presentation we received - taken from a well known schools presentation 'Licence to Kill'. It involved two very brave ladies, one who had lost her son who was a passenger in a collision. The second a passenger who had survived while her friends had been killed. Neither had been wearing their seat belts.

Once we had all recovered fellow ADI Emma Ashley queried whether we were doing the right thing. "I train my pupils to believe that they are safe and confident drivers.....maybe we shouldn't be doing that so well...", I had to in part agree. It left me wondering how to make them excellent without making them over confident. After all, the biggest issue with operating a car is that once you can it becomes automatic or second nature. I later reflected on something I hold very dear, again from a fellow ADI Louise Walsh. I had made a bold statement along the lines of "Surely all driving instructors share the goal that they are training pupils to be safe?" After a pause Louise said "I don't want to train people to be safe... I want to train them well enough that they can *choose* to be dangerous." ... After a pause... having bitten back a "OMG are you stupid!"... The profound nature and truth in what she said hit me, and has stayed with me since. We need to be training people not just to drive safely, but to understand the nature of driving unsafely. Only then can they make the choice, rather than follow the diktat we lay before them. This led me to do what I always do when I am searching, I spoke to my 17-24 year old experts - my pupils.

Through a number of discussions it became clear that:

- a) Hindsight is a wonderful thing - they all acknowledged doing 'stupid' things 'in the moment'.
- b) They never set out to do 'stupid' things.
- c) They understood danger, they just had difficulty seeing it at times.

This is when I discovered the paper by Dee Ganley.

Dee started out by stating:

"We used to say a trained dog is a free dog, a dog that could go with us anywhere on or off lead. They knew how to "behave" in the human-controlled world. But what we should have said is: A dog with self-control is a free dog. Freedom for dogs has everything to do with impulse control and little to do with whether they can heel or shake their paw. Dogs have to live safely and non-aggressively in a man-made world. Our responsibility to our dogs means training impulse control, which leads to teaching self-control."

Historically driving instruction has been very similar. We used to say drivers who can successfully and safely pass the operational test were safe to be let free on the roads. They

knew how to use a car on the road inside set conditions. However, now we acknowledge the factors outside of those operational conditions. These are being explored through the likes of coached approaches and the factors outlined in the GDE Matrix\*, specifically the higher levels. What we are now saying is: A driver with time to evaluate and make decisions is a safe driver. It is not about car control, it is about the decisions the driver makes and the factors which affect them.

As with Dee's assessment of the changing nature of dogs, we see the same with young drivers. The environment in which they operate is changing. More cars, more hazards and increased pressures to comply with the society around them. They require a greater ability to control these impulses and make controlled decisions. As with Dee's observations - we can see an increase in collision risk in-line with increased levels of adrenalin, cortisol, testosterone, estradiol and other 'sensation seeking' and stress hormones. So maybe as driver trainers we need to be delivering 'Impulse Control' lessons as part of our syllabus.

Here's what Dee does:

### **The “Chill Out” Game**

Play can be an important reinforcer for dogs who need to learn self-control. The “Chill Out” game is designed to use the opportunity to play as the reward for self-control. The particular importance of this game is that it will teach the dog that he can go from really high arousal to instant calm—this game will help you install an "on/off" switch. The goal is to teach the dog that he can substitute a calm behaviour for his agitated state. Examples would be performing a competing behaviour like fetching a specific toy (that the dog finds comforting) or going to a particular place and lying down to then earning a treat of some sort. The reinforcer you use will of course depend on the specific dog! There are many versions of this particular game this is the one I most use.

The game involves deliberately getting the dog fired up to play and then having him “chill out” on cue. This can help to teach the dog to calm himself in high-excitement situations, such as when he is around children, or when company comes to the home.

- First you need to teach either a sit or down that is very reliable.

(\* The Goals for Driver Education (GDE) are set out in a matrix, designed to help us address factors affecting our learner drivers and giving us a framework through which to deliver our training.)

- Now get the dog excited by playing tug or chasing a toy on a string, or play wrestling game or pinchy-pinch if that's what he normally likes to play with you.
- In the middle of the game, stop all play, become like a tree and quietly ask for a sit or down.
- The dog's reward for sitting is to immediately re-engage them in the game.

The dog will learn quickly that their calm sit or down is what gets the game going again. You can play around with varying the length of time the dog has to sit before playing again, vary the cue (sit, down, or simply settle), and vary the length of the playing.

Once you have taught the game, you need to add short bursts of activity interspersed with quiet times, which I find is what normal dogs do given the chance. For example, play or practice recalls or go running for five to ten minutes and then have quiet time for approximately 15-20 minutes. Your goal is to start to arouse your dog with activity and then bring him down before he loses control.

I have read many studies on the affect of testosterone, adrenalin and other such responses on driver decision making, particularly in adolescent males. Reflecting on my own training I do cover and discuss the affects of this on lessons. Locally I have a lovely stretch that covers country roads, into villages, out onto Dual Carriageways, back into towns past schools. Many test routes also simulate this changing state going from faster to slower roads or vice versa, and are the ones we often see speeding faults on. Even just the stimulation of the test itself can cause a change in perception of speed, awareness and fight or flight responses. The ability to take learners on motorways allows us to also explore this relative concept of speed and their response to it. Perception of speed can vary greatly with this change between these environments and drivers often fail to notice the reality.

We are all well aware of the increased risk faced by male drivers, and male drivers with peer passengers (14-24 years old). Males drivers are statistically 4x more likely to have a crash, and with peer passengers added this again increases the risk 4x! These factors also give us the realisation that the most likely place for a young female to die is in the passenger seat of her boyfriends car! It is no surprise that these young males are victims of their own arousal, and behind the wheel of a fast moving vehicle is not what these response, stress and instinct hormones are designed for. Thus exercises like Dee describes, developing the ability to control these impulses, could be the key to reduced road risk.

Dee suggests an interesting tool for monitoring this impulse control. I wondered if, for the ADI, there were two uses. One as the trainer keeping note of this impulse development, and a second as a skill for the developing driver. A technique to monitor, assess and reflect on their own control. Dee advises:

You must hold yourself accountable for really watching the dog and learning when to step in to ask for the cooling off behaviour to lower the dogs arousal. You may need to keep a diary for a few days to discover the rhythm of the day and know when best to engage the dog. I find it is really helpful to keep a point system. Give yourself 20 points for each successful encounter, which means there was no loss of impulse control. And deduct 2,000 points if your dog loses control. This way you will know where you stand. Your goal is to accumulate 1,000 points.

If you work in short sessions, you are likely to gain the most points! Long sessions may actually further reinforce the "get revved and keep going till you fall over" pattern of response. This response can carry over to barking and eventually aggressing at you which is not our goal. You want to anticipate "turning the arousal switch" off before your dog loses self-control.

Consistency and lots of practice produces the best and most lasting results. Fortunately for us, in my experience dogs enjoy practicing the same thing over and over if we have kept it fun and brief. Interrupting and redirecting inappropriate behaviour very early is the key to reinforcing self-control. While I find formal obedience training is good goal, the very foundation of this behaviour must be based on the dog achieving emotional self- control.

As we know, self reflection and awareness of things like the 'Halo effect\*' are vital to us keeping realistic track of each pupils progress. I thought this was a very interesting system that could not only be used by ADIs, but as a self-reward system for drivers to evaluate themselves.

(\*Halo Effect - A cognitive bias where your overall impression of an individual leads you to associated judgements about their skill or ability. Therefore pupils that you have good rapport with may be treated more favourably than those you don't.)

What should you be looking for when your dog is “on?”

Your dog should appear “happy” yet able to focus his attention on you. The moment you see your dog unable to focus on you because his arousal is escalating, stop the game. This might occur because the dog is starting to go into his “own little world.” This is usually indicated by the dog no longer playing with you but rather beginning to initiate a different or more intense game. I might see something as simple as faster and/or harder movements, or actually using his mouth, teeth, or paws to connect with my body. This is when you should use your “off” switch to bring the dog back to you. During the “off” behaviour I am waiting to see signs that the dog's arousal level has shifted: a softening of the overall muscular body tension and the return of more “normal” eye movement. The dog stops staring at me in anticipation of more action and begins to appear more aware of what’s happening around him.

Right, please remember, this is a dog not a developing driver. If the driver starts using their mouth, teeth or paws then I think we agree you have a very different issue! But the identifiers are the same. Change in focus or attention, different style or speed of gear changing, positioning. As those who have heard me talk or attended an 'Introduction to NLP for ADIs' course will know, I am a big fan of breathing! Not as obvious as it might sound, by observing a drivers breathing patterns we can identify a lot about their state. It is rare that someone fails a driving test without a noticeable change in their breathing patterns. In fact, when I have achieved rapport I can feel my own heart-rate pacing theirs, giving me a real insight into their perception of things. These changes may help you identify the peaks that Dee refers to and when to apply the "off switch" - stopping, facilitating state change, etc.

So what changes can follow?

I need to make sure that I am relaxed too or its not going to help the dog. Wait to see signs of overall relaxation. The dog will often "soften" as he lets go of the muscle tension, and this may even be accompanied by a good sigh of relief. If you haven't gone overboard with the "on" part, then the "off" should follow quite quickly. Be patient!

At this point, provide the dog with a nice, needed reinforcement. It puts their "patience" into perspective. It may take a few minutes to achieve, but coming down to a less aroused emotional state is not easy. If you've overdone it, and that's most likely as you fine tune your

ability to read individual dogs, just be patient, ask for the "off" behaviour, and then be-still yourself. You'll want to stand quietly relaxed (joints flexed, jaw soft, slow blink rate, slow deep breathing) and wait till the dog relaxes, however long it might take. Be sure and watch that you also are giving off clear relaxed body signals. Be soft and supple while standing relaxed. Ahhh, there you have it!

How do we adapt this to driver training?

There are an endless raft of ideas that you could implement to parallel the approach Dee takes, they do not need to be complicated but will all follow the following stages.

- Awareness. Working with our own observational skills and spotting the signs. I am sure that many do this already, however making it a conscious exercise can often enhance and develop the process. Specifically setting an exercise or route during which your primary objective is to what the physiological changes - breathing, posture, attitude, alertness.

- Action. Delivering an exercise to draw out the behaviour so it can be addressed. This can be done overtly or covertly. i.e. You could say to the pupil 'I want to assess your response to speed...' or you could do the drive and then discuss it. Asking the pupil what identifying signs they noticed, how it felt, and if they even noticed. Identifying triggers and changes allows actions to be taken.

- Solution. Develop coping strategies to counter these challenges. Ollie Ollerton in his book *Battle Ready* speaks of the SBS' (Special Boat Service) use of the three stage process:

Breathe - Recalibrate - Deliver

It could be that simple, but it has to be identified to be achieved. Alternatively pulling over and stopping, which leads on to a whole other lesson of where it is acceptable to do so.

Suggestions for themes or tasks could be a time trial, using music of increasing tempo, or a bit of 'active encouragement'. One of my favoured approaches is 'running late' in which I give the impression that we need to be getting back, building the importance of haste and making progress. I then get to step in if they overstep and help them develop some much needed skills. Equally making use of differing road speeds can do this without the need for storytelling or encouragement.

Imagine the benefits to a pupil under pressure, be it on the driving test or with friends in the car, who can identify this change and take action.

I will finish by saying, We are not the same as dogs (they don't wage wars or destroy the planet to start with), we have the ability to choose, reason and understand the results of our actions, but we are still genetically slaves to our impulses. Maybe with Dee's help, we can reduce their effect? And I will leave the final word to Dee:

Remember we all need some amount of impulse control. Some of us must learn how to achieve self control while with others it happens naturally.