



**NATP**  
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION  
OF THERAPEUTIC PARENTS



*Centre of Excellence in*  
**CHILD TRAUMA**

## Car issues WHY?

car journeys are extremely triggering for children with a history of trauma. Written by Sarah Dillon

1. Transitions increase the stress response within the child 2. Child has heightened levels of Cortisol within their system which significantly increases during the journey 3. Initially removed from birth family, previous foster family and taken elsewhere in a car 4. Social workers drive cars 😊 5. The brain stores this information as a traumatic event which is then triggered again during some or all car journeys 6. Child has not got your attention. Their behaviour may induce negative attention, but it is still attention! 7. Your back is turned towards the child which can be perceived as rejection, being forgotten, or being ignored. 8. Other early life fears are also triggered at this time such as fear of not being fed so they may demand food. 9. Child feels trapped, and their fight/flight/freeze mechanism is ignited 10. Child scared about where you might be taking them. Are they moving to another home??? 11. If going to school, nursery etc, they need to prepare themselves for separation from you. This can cause feelings of fear of rejection and abandonment. They will often reject you before you get a chance to reject them. So, you leave in tears and they are ok! 😞 12. They feel very out of control because the driver (you) are in control of the car and therefore in control of them. This can cause extreme fear as they fear adults and have an innate NEED to be in control to feel safe 13. They cannot cope with a silent journey as the CALM comes before a STORM, so they create the storm to get it out of the way 😡 14. Child cannot identify and express any physical discomfort during the journey such as travel sickness etc. They communicate this via their behaviour 🤢 WHAT might help 1. Naming the need, emotions driving the behaviour and feed this back to the child. You might say something like 'I wonder if you're feeling sad about going to school/nursery today which is why you're wobbly on the journey' 2. Remind the child you have not forgotten them while you are driving 3. Sing to them when driving 4. Play cd/songs you can sing together 5. Play games such as let us count how many red cars we can see or something similar 6. Have food they can either chew or crunch and a cup with a stiff straw to suck though 7. Sit child who wobbles the most behind passenger seat. You can still see them! 8. STOP if journey becomes unsafe or pull over as soon as safe to do so. 9. Tell child/children you can see they are struggling and 'name the need' regulate the child. Then sit and read a book or something similar until they are ready for you to drive safely again. 10. Use natural or logical consequences such as 'hopefully we'll be able to drive again in a minute or sadly we'll have less time at the park later because I'll have to find the time I've lost sitting here. That would be such a shame' 😞 or 'unfortunately, I am not going to be able to do XYZ drive later as it is far too dangerous. Sadly, we'll have to walk' 😞 11. Try to have two adults on the journey (one in the back if possible). 12. Use transitional objects from home. Perhaps a teddy or small toy 13. Give them something that smells of you hold while you drive 14. Have fleecy blankets in car to for child to wrap around them or for them to hide under if feeling unsafe 15. NB \* If all else fails, breathe deeply, talk to yourself or PRAY 😊 for excellent resources, information, and support, please join the [naotp.com](http://naotp.com)