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Teaching an old dog a new trick can take time

Dear Gus,

Our older dog Princess can no longer jump up into the rear of our station wagon. We have since gotten a dog ramp to assist her but have not yet introduced it to her.

We have heard many stories from other dog owners about their dogs rejecting the ramps. How should we introduce Princess to the ramps?

Fred D., Orange.

Great question Fred, and one that is asked a lot now that our canine companions are living longer lives. Before I go any further, I'm assuming she likes the car and has no bad reaction to going for a ride. If she sees going for a ride as a positive thing, this will be much easier.

The first thing I'd try is just set the ramp up on the car and put Princess on leash and bring her over to it. Some dogs are afraid of anything new and different so you want to start slowly, but make sure that you don't transmit any anxiety to her.

You can gauge her reaction by her willingness to make an approach to the ramp. That said, read her body language and she will let you know as you approach the ramp how it will go. If there is any reluctance to get near the ramp, don't stress her; just casually walk her around getting closer and closer to the ramp.

This may be quick or it may take a couple of days to desensitize her to the ramp. Once she willingly approaches the ramp, you can walk her up one side, and have a helper on the other side in case she panics and tries to jump off. Once she is on it, hopefully she will walk in the car.

You can also use a trail of special food treats on the ramp up to the car and let her eat her way in. The distraction of the food will distract her from the fact that she's on a ramp and she'll be in the car without realizing she even went up a ramp.

If all this fails, you and your helper may need to somewhat firmly walk her straight up the ramp. Don't make a fuss and don't panic - just walk her straight into the car, then lavish her with praise. It will get easier the more you use it. Good luck! I hope this helps,

Gus.

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