

Driving With Children And Pets

(NAPSA)—Both pets and children can be a major distraction while driving, and it's not always easy to keep them safe in and around a vehicle. "Messy passengers of all shapes and sizes can take a driver's mind off the road," says Sue Elliott-Sink, director of content for enjoythedrive.com, the consumer Web site from SEMA, the Specialty Equipment Market Association.

"Because the last thing anyone would want to do is injure a loved one, drivers also must be especially careful with children and pets on-board and around the vehicle."

That's why enjoythedrive.com has put together these tips.

1. Make it easier to get in and out.

Many small children and older pets have a tough time climbing in and out of today's vehicles—but that doesn't mean they don't want to do it themselves. You can make it easier for everybody to get into and out of a pickup, van or SUV by adding a set of running boards or side steps. Ramps designed to make loading cargo easier also work wonders for older dogs and cats.

2. Protect your vehicle's interior.

Shedding fur, dirty paws, dirty shoes and spilled juice can do a number on your seats and carpet—and raise your stress level while you're driving.

Fortunately, waterproof and washable seat covers make cleanups easy, while they protect cloth and leather seats from scratches and tears.

Plus, a set of carpet or rubberized floor liners will contain mud and melting snow, as well as cat-sip and juice spills, so your vehicle's carpet doesn't need frequent attention.

You also may want to add a quick spritz of vinyl or upholstery protectant to your vehicle's door panels and headliner, because there's no telling how far french fries can travel—and one good shake by a wet dog can cover an entire interior with mud spots.



Running boards, nerf bars (shown) and side steps make it easier for children and pets to get into and out of a vehicle on their own.

If you travel with children, you probably keep cleanup wipes on hand; but did you know there are disposable wipes designed to clean up your vehicle's interior, too? Keeping a stash of these in the glovebox can make messes less aggravating.

3. Keep Fido contained.

Pets that roam around inside a vehicle can be terribly distracting—especially when they're wet or dirty. An unsecured pet also can turn into a projectile in a car crash.

The good news: It's easy to contain a dog in the cargo area of most vans, SUVs and wagons using a pet barrier. Add a cargo area liner for carpet and seatback protection, and you've kept the mess to a minimum, too.

Many states have laws concerning dogs that ride in the bed of a pickup. Even if a state doesn't require a dog restraint system, a simple leash-style setup that provides enough slack for your pooch to roam, but not enough to jump out—or be flung out in a crash—is a wise investment.

Another option is a truck cap (aka a camper shell), which provides weather protection for pets traveling in the bed. Most models are available with screened side windows, too, so pets can get good sniffs without getting loose.

4. Keep kids entertained.

Bored children can make a driver crazy. Using one or more cargo organizers to keep toys within reach of children can help reduce stress behind the wheel—and help drivers avoid taking their eyes off the road. There are even tray tables designed to let children draw, play cards or eat comfortably while they're en route.

An entertainment system can keep children of all ages amused, too, whether they want to play video games or watch a movie while you drive.

5. Make sure seat belts fit kids properly.

Once your children have outgrown their child safety seats, odds are they still will need a booster seat (which is required by law in some states). Children also can benefit from a simple seat belt adjuster that will hold belts away from their neck.

6. Steer clear of children and pets.

Young children and animals often don't know to stay away from a moving vehicle. That's why you need to be extra careful—especially in your own garage and driveway.

A backup warning system that beeps and provides a visual alert when you are getting close to an object can be helpful. Another option, a rear-mounted camera, shows you exactly what's behind your vehicle when you're in reverse.

Even something as simple as a set of wide-angle mirrors that attach to your vehicle's outside mirrors can help you avoid backing over a toy—or worse.

Many of these auto accessories are available from auto parts stores, as well as truck accessory and outdoor/sporting goods stores.

For more information on child- and pet-friendly auto accessories, visit www.enjoythedrive.com. The Web site includes information on hundreds of the latest custom auto accessories, as well as links to product manufacturers' and retailers' Web sites. If you don't have Internet access, write to SEMA, Children & Pets, 1575 S. Valley Vista Dr., Diamond Bar, CA 91765-3914.