



TRAFFIC AWARENESS AND SAFETY

How can a Pilot Dog work to keep you safe when working around moving traffic, particularly when crossing streets? This lecture will explain:

- The roles of both handler and dog in making safe street crossings
- Different actions the dog may take in response to traffic conditions
- How you should respond to the dog's actions with regard to traffic checks
- Maintaining a dog's traffic responses over time
- Crossing roads safely

It should be noted that we refer to any action that a dog takes to avoid a moving vehicle as a "traffic check."

The Roles of Both Handler and Dog in Making Safe Street Crossings

Both handler and dog have responsibilities when crossing streets. The handler's responsibilities:

- Ensure that the team is aligned properly to enter the intersection by listening to parallel traffic and by using environmental cues like foot position on the curb or ramp.
- Take the time to understand the intersection: determine the type of control present (stop sign or traffic light), the length of the light cycle, whether there is a turn arrow, and whether the intersection is actuated so you give the "Forward" command at the safest time.
- Ensure you have the dog's attention before giving the "Forward" command.
- Enter the street with the mindset that a traffic check could happen anytime and be ready to respond to your dog's actions.

It is your responsibility to ensure that it is safe to enter the street, and it is the dog's responsibility to take evasive action as necessary for any moving car that presents a threat in the crossing.

Actions the Dog May Take in Response to Traffic Conditions

The following are the most commonly-encountered responses you may notice from your dog in response to traffic:

- The dog may refuse to enter the street when you give the “Forward” command.
- The dog may suddenly stop or take a few steps backward in the middle of a crossing if an unexpected car crosses your path.
- The dog may take a couple of steps back from the down curb if a very large or loud vehicle turns in front of him.

Your Response to the Dog’s Actions with Regard to Traffic

Your job in street crossings:

- Be ready for a traffic check at all times.
- Remain calm if a traffic check happens.
- Reward your dog.
- Maintain alignment during and after the check.
- Verbally encourage the dog to continue once the car has passed if the dog does not continue on his own.

Maintaining a Dog’s Traffic Responses Over Time

Today’s traffic conditions present hazards for all pedestrians, and the dangers for people who are blind are constantly increasing: cars become quieter, filter lights at junctions complicate the timing of the decision to leave the curb, and the curbs themselves are often rounded rather than right-angled so that vehicles are able to turn into and out of side roads more quickly.

Add to these problems the fact that the volume of traffic has increased markedly in the last 10 years, and it becomes immediately obvious that the days are long past when the guide dog provided a measure of safety in virtually any traffic situation.

However, it is still true to say that, in certain conditions where the volume of traffic is light and distractions are few, the dog does provide a measure of safety. To maintain your dog’s awareness of traffic, it is necessary to artificially reinforce this aspect. The following procedure should be practiced regularly – preferably once on each walk – unless the dog begins to “stick”

at curbs as a result of over-awareness, in which case reinforcement should be stopped for a few days and then reintroduced on a regular basis.

1. Walk with the main road on your right, houses and yards on your left.
2. Upon reaching a quiet side road, wait until a car comes along from the left on the near side of the road.
3. Just before the car pulls in front of you, give your dog an ordinary “Forward” command. Do not use a hand signal or the driver will become alarmed and will probably stop to allow you to cross.
4. Your dog should, of course, disobey this command, in which case you give gentle praise. If he makes any attempt to move off, restrain him with a backward check on the handle and the command “No, watch!”
5. Once the car has pulled away, reassess the crossing and give a normal “Forward” command with hand signal once the road is clear.

This reinforcement applies only to near traffic. Under no circumstances should you deliberately begin to cross a road in order to test or reinforce your dog’s far traffic awareness. This is highly dangerous for yourself and also for those (including your dog) who may be forced into a state of panic by your actions.

Most dogs maintain traffic responses very well over the course of their working career. However, there are some situations that can cause a dog’s traffic responses to change slightly:

- If a team that has always worked in a rural area with very little moving traffic moves to an urban or suburban area, the dog may be “rusty” with traffic skills, and the handler should be alert for any signs that the dog may need a brush-up.
- If you habitually rush your dog in street crossings – for example, if you say “Forward” as you step into the street without giving the dog time to judge traffic, or you push the dog forward with the harness or pull it with the leash into the intersection, the dog will assume that he is no longer responsible for ensuring conditions are safe and will learn that instant response to “Forward” is what you want. A dog’s traffic responses can easily break down if he is handled in this way.
- Finally, dogs that work in urban areas with many gridlocks often become more confident in their traffic work and get closer to slow-moving vehicles than they would have in class. This is normal for dogs in this type of environment and is generally not cause for concern.

- If you ever have concerns that your dog is not responding properly to moving traffic, please contact Pilot Dogs for assistance.

Crossing Roads Safely

When crossing roads, you are safer if you pay attention to the following points:

- Do not rush. Cross steadily so that your dog and the drivers have time to react correctly if you have made an error in judging the traffic flow.
- Cross at junctions rather than halfway along a stretch of road. At junctions, you are more visible, the drivers are more prepared to encounter pedestrians, and there is less chance of you suddenly emerging from between parked cars. Also, your dog is more inclined to cross in a straight line here, as he can see the continuation of the pavement on the far side of the road.
- Wherever possible, use pedestrian light-controlled crossings, even if it means a slight detour from your regular route.
- Do not cross roads near the brows of hills or bends.
- If possible, wear light-colored clothing that may help to make you more visible to drivers, particularly at night.
- Remember that wet or icy road conditions can seriously affect the stopping distances of motor vehicles and, as a result, extra caution is required.
- Do accept help from members of the public, even if it is offered at a road that you normally cross independently. At some other time, you or another person who is blind may welcome that help.

In today's traffic conditions, remember that it is unreasonable to expect your dog to make accurate assessments of traffic flow. Because dogs do not know the potential danger of vehicles, a correct response can never be guaranteed.