



DRIVING AND ASD: DETERMINING READINESS

For teens and young adults on the autism spectrum, the decision to pursue a driver's license is a milestone that other families might take for granted as a natural rite of passage for teenagers. We rely on transportation to get to work, to shop, to access healthcare and higher education services, and to participate in community and social events. When driving, there are no schedules to seek out, no waiting for the buses in the rain or cold, and no need to pay a lot of money for a cab or ride-sharing service. Driving can be the most efficient way to get around.

The decision whether or not to pursue a driver's license is an important discussion for individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) to have with their families and with their support team during the transition to adulthood. For those who are uninterested or unable to drive, [OTHER TRANSPORTATION OPTIONS](#) must be found to give them access to community activities, employment, and social relationships.

A recent study showed that one in three young adults with ASD earned a driver's license, and did so on just a slightly delayed schedule (on average 9.2 months later) compared with their peers without ASD.

When determining whether driving is appropriate, be sure to discuss readiness to drive with your developmental pediatrician and autism support team. Consider that driving is much more than learning "the rules of the road" and being able to pass a licensing test. It entails social judgment; motor coordination; pre-planning; flexibility to change; the ability to focus, multi-task, prioritize, and control one's anxiety and sensory sensitivities. ASD can affect decision-making, information processing and attention to varying degrees. On the other hand, an individual with ASD may have characteristics that promote safe driving behavior, such as a vigilance to follow driving laws.

For example, consider the nonverbal communication that frequently occurs when multiple vehicles meet at a four way stop sign. Drivers typically nod or motion to each other to communicate who is to go next as not everyone knows the rules related to order of entry into the intersection. Also, drivers must be aware that other drivers don't always act as expected. For example, a turn signal doesn't always mean the car is about to turn; it could

mean the driver forgot to turn the signal off.

Drivers must always be prepared for the unexpected, including rerouting (if a road is closed), speed limit or seat belt checkpoints, approaching emergency vehicles (with loud sirens and blinking lights), unsafe drivers, and breakdowns. All drivers must know how to respond if pulled over by the police, regardless of “guilt” or innocence and must know what to do and who to call if the car breaks down or runs out of gas or if they are involved in an accident. Driving also requires being responsible for the maintenance of the car, to some extent. Drivers need to make sure the car has enough gas, tires are properly inflated, and all parts (for example, turn signals) are functioning appropriately.

An important step for parents and caregivers of teens with ASD who are considering driving is to schedule a doctor’s appointment to discuss any concerns, such as attention issues. It might also help to talk with your teen’s network of support professionals when assessing specific skills associated with driving.

The autism and driving research team at CHOP developed [THIS LIST OF QUESTIONS](#) they recommend discussing as a family and with your clinical and educational support team. You might also consider adding goals about driving to your individualized education plan (IEP).

If you need help in learning to drive (or teaching someone to drive) or assessing readiness to drive, seek the advice of an occupational therapist who specializes in driving or a certified rehabilitation specialist trained to work with individuals with special needs. Check with your local school district or intermediate unit for a list of names of professionals near you. Sometimes parents are equipped to teach their children, but parents may have their own anxieties concerning their children’s readiness and may not always be the best choice.

Your pediatrician can also help with these decisions. Indeed, in Pennsylvania, physicians and other professionals who diagnose and/or treat individuals with disabilities and medical disorders are required to report to the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation the names of patients ages 15 and older who have conditions that could impair their ability to safely operate a motor vehicle. Other states have different strategies for identifying and assessing drivers with impairments.

Though states set an age when individuals can obtain a driver’s license, there is no magic age when one is “ready” to drive. Maybe now is the right time, maybe in a few years the time will be right. It is important to make a decision that is right for you and your family.

Related Articles:

- [GETTING AROUND: IT’S A MATTER OF INDEPENDENCE](#)

- [QUESTIONS TO DISCUSS WHEN DETERMINING DRIVING READINESS](#)

Additional Resources:

- [DRIVING AND AUTISM FROM A PARENT'S PERSPECTIVE](#)
- [DRIVING IN TEENS WITH AUTISM, FROM CHOP'S CENTER FOR INJURY AND PREVENTION](#)
- [THE CHALLENGE OF DRIVING WITH ASPERGER'S, FROM THE NEW YORK TIMES](#)
- [DRIVEWISE AND DRIVEADVISE, FROM THE BETH ISRAEL DEACONESS MEDICAL CENTER](#)
- [DRIVING AND AUTISM](#)
- [FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH DRIVING IN TEENS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER](#)

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