

autism at-a-glance

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Autism at-a-Glance is a publication of the Center on Secondary Education for Students with ASD (CSESA).



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Getting a Driver's License

Autism at-a-Glance is a series of practitioner and family-friendly documents created by the Center on Secondary Education for Students with ASD (CSESA) designed for high school staff members supporting students on the autism spectrum, as well as family members of adolescents with ASD. The purpose of the *Autism at-a-Glance* series is to provide a current summary of topics relevant to high school students with ASD as well as practical tips and resources for school and community personnel and family members.

This *Autism at-a-Glance* was designed to support parents and other family members in supporting adolescents on the autism spectrum as they learn to drive and eventually take a driver's test for their license.

One of the biggest milestones in an adolescent's life can be getting a driver's license. However, compared to the general population, individuals with ASD get their driver's license later in life, and drive less often. Adolescents with ASD who are eligible to get a driver's license are encouraged to do so, as having a license can result in increased independence and opens door for new opportunities in social interaction and employment.

Why Learn to Drive?

Although the idea of your teen learning to drive may be a scary one, in many cases, there are valuable benefits that can be gained from it. Research shows that learning to drive strengthens community living and feelings of self-identity, both of which are key to emotional wellbeing in adolescents and young adults.

Learning to drive is a skill that remains useful throughout an individual's life, as it acts as a means of transportation to and from future jobs and other necessary destinations, like the grocery store or a friend's house. There may come a time and place where public transportation is not available or is highly inconvenient and being able to drive allows the learner to bypass these obstacles.



Learning to Drive

Have the Conversation with Your Teen

The first step in teaching your teen to drive is to make sure they want, and are ready, to learn. It is possible for any student to be uncomfortable with the idea of driving, and this may be a heightened possibility for teens with ASD who may be more anxious in unfamiliar situations such as learning to drive a car. They may not be ready right now or may simply have no desire to learn to drive yet, so make sure to sit down with them and discuss the pros and cons of obtaining a license and consider their thoughts and feelings on the matter.

Have the Conversation with Your Healthcare Specialist

To make sure your teen is eligible to be a legal driver, consult with your developmental pediatrician or autism support team. Eligibility depends on many factors such as your teen's individual developmental level, whether they have any additional diagnoses like ADHD or are on medication that may interfere with operation of a vehicle. If a medical professional clears your teen for driving and your teen has decided they are ready, they may begin the process of learning to drive!

Decide the Method of Education

As a parent, you may feel comfortable and adequately equipped to teach your teen to drive on your own. Even if this is the case, you may want to seek out resources in your area for advice on teaching strategies for driving to adolescents with ASD. In addition to the driver's education course that your state requires to prepare for a written test, your

child would likely benefit from extra education from resources specifically created to help those with developmental disorders. Your local school district should have a list of professionals you can look through, such as occupational therapists and professionals with special training in driving education.

You can also supplement your teen's educational track with driving simulations that allow the participant to practice road rules in a risk-free environment. These may be available at locations such as driving rehabilitation services or even within a local high school's driver's education program.

Set an Example

It is well-documented by research that students with ASD learn well by watching and imitating other individuals. Every time you are in the car with them, you are acting as a model for their future driving behavior. Be sure to remain calm at all times when driving, avoiding showing signs of agitation, road rage, and distracted driving behaviors such as texting/talking on the phone.

Before you allow your teen to get behind the wheel, try engaging in this modeling strategy of teaching by explaining to them what you are doing and why you are doing it, and asking them questions about driving situations to gauge their understanding. This will make for a good foundation of knowledge so that they are not taking in as much new information all at once when they are driving themselves.



On the Road

When it comes time for your teen to get behind the wheel for the first time, it may be helpful to choose a location that does not have as much sensory information to process. Try taking them to an unpopulated area of road, such as an empty parking lot, before working up to more complex situations. You can then progress to the slower-paced streets of a neighborhood, and then finally city roads. Of course, this transition will not occur all in one day. Every new driver learns at a different pace and feels comfortable with different levels of transition, so let them set the track for this learning process.

Other strategies that have proven to be effective in teaching students with ASD are listed below. Try using these methods as a foundation for the teaching process you embark on with your teen.

- Break down the process into smaller, individual steps
- Take advantage of regular practice and repetition
- Be patient and calm; avoid showing signs of frustration that may worry your teen

Learner's Permit

State laws differ on age restrictions for driving, but they all require drivers to test for a learner's permit before testing for an actual license. The test for a learner's permit is a written exam that outlines road rules and signs, most of which is new material to teenagers who have no driving experience, so make sure your teen studies for this exam like they would any other test. You can help by quizzing them with

questions and flash cards with them to cement this knowledge and ensure success. Depending on where you live, this test can be taken online rather than in person at the DMV, which may decrease the potential stress that an unfamiliar social interaction or overstimulating environment might put on an adolescent with ASD.

Visit the Resources section at the end of this document for practice permit exams that can help your student study for the permit test.

Know What to Expect

You should be able to find a list on your state's official DMV website detailing what will be expected of your driver during the road test. Make sure to practice all these required abilities with your teen when teaching them to drive so that they feel well prepared for their license examination. You may even want to rehearse it with them, taking on the role of the examiner: greeting them, have them proceed through the road test while you use a check list, ask questions, and take notes on their driving. Through this rehearsal, your child will feel more comfortable when they take the real test, as it will no longer be a new situation.

If at First You Don't Succeed...

There is of course the possibility that even with all of the above preparation, your teen may not pass the driver's test on the first attempt. This may be due to nerves or just simple mistakes. The DMV employee who administered the test will tell the test-taker what they were marked down for, so make sure to take notes and work specifically on those aspects of driving

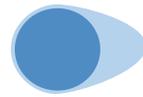


to have better success next time. Failing a driving test can be very discouraging for your teen, so make sure to remind them after the test that it is completely normal not to pass on the first try. In fact, the average state pass rate in the US varies from around 80% to as low as 39%. Just encourage them to keep working towards the goal, and when they do pass the test, make sure to compliment them on their persistence and hard work.

Post-test Success

Set Rules

Like any other teenager, adolescents with ASD need rules and boundaries set in place to keep them safe. For the initial time-period after your teen successfully gets his or her license, consider limiting driving at night, or in adverse weather conditions. Depending on the state you live in, there may be enforced curfews for drivers under the age of 18, but you may also want to establish your own curfews and rules. Make sure your teen knows when and where it is ok for them to drive and establish whether or not they must ask permission before they take the car out.



Tips & Precautions

GPS

Some parents have found that investing in a GPS for the car that their child drives helps to facilitate a smoother driving process due to the visual and verbal cues that it provides.

Emergency instructions

It is also a good idea to put a note or paper somewhere in the car, like the glove box, that lists step by step instructions for what to do in case of emergency, such as an accident. Your young driver can refer to this rather than panicking in these potentially stressful situations.

Car bumper sticker

There are also bumper or window stickers available for purchase online that let personnel like police drivers know that there is a driver with autism in the car. This allows police who may interact with your child to be aware that they may have to be more patient and calm during the interaction, avoiding unnecessary misunderstandings that may have occurred otherwise.





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Resources

Driving Readiness?

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