



**DRIVING WITH AUTISM
RESOURCE GUIDE**
Brought to you by The Next Street



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The Next Street's Driving and Autism Resource Guide for families and individuals on the autism spectrum is adapted from presentations by Andrew Arboe and The Next Street.

Special thanks to The Next Street for compiling this information in a structured, fact-based format.

For more information or to enroll in Driving with ASD courses, visit autism.thenextstreet.com

For more information on financial planning for driving, visit www.planningacrossthespectrum.com

Dear Readers:

Welcome! The Next Street's Driving and Autism Resource Guide was funded by The Next Street and was adapted with permission from presentations by Andrew Arboe.

Many states do not offer a "road map" that details how individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder, or ASD, and their families can navigate the complex driving system, but we hope this Resource Guide can serve as a place to start. This resource guide presents the obstacles associated with an individual with ASD securing a driver's license while also highlighting available support opportunities.

Here you will discover what is or is not available now, what best practices are being considered throughout the country, and what we are calling "next practices", which individuals and families could be practicing if given the opportunity. This guide should be viewed as a journey towards establishing a family member's comfortability and knowledge as it pertains to driving that will ultimately enable you or your loved one to live as independently as possible.

Written for families, this resource guide summarizes driving models through the experiences of individuals and families and offers suggestions for an individual's unique driving needs. It goes without saying that driving is important to most people. Whether it is to get to work, school, leisure activities, spiritual pursuits or appointments, driving can be learned by individuals with ASD with the appropriate support, training and confidence building exercises.

We are grateful to those who contributed to the development of this important resource. The Next Street recognized the need for this guide, offered critical input, and generously provided funding for its development and dissemination. But most importantly, thanks to the individuals and families who shared their personal journeys so that others could benefit from their experiences and who continue to inspire me every day to keep looking at ways to teach individuals with ASD to drive.

As part of your journey, I encourage you to familiarize yourself with the many resources The Next Street offers. For more information, visit <https://autism.thenextstreet.com>.

The Next Street's Driving and Autism Resource Guide will continue to evolve in its content and presentation; therefore, I encourage you to contact us with feedback, recommendations, and additional ideas. Good luck on your journey.

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CHAPTER 1: IS DRIVING RIGHT FOR YOU?

Autism is full of characteristic nuances like social interaction, motor skills, and sensory processing issues. Executive functioning is an area easily affected by autism. Executive functioning is especially important for driving. For example, knowing when to change lanes or knowing how to read and react to road signs all require your executive functions. For many young adults with ASD, developing emotionally comes at different ages than a neurotypical young adult. At times, families and individuals wait until a new driver is in their 20's before they start driving. There's no 'right age,' there's just the age that is right for you.

There are many things to consider when asking yourself if you should drive:

- 1. Emotionally:** Do you want to drive?
- 2. Medically:** Based on evaluations using a Certified Driving Rehab Specialist (CDRS) and other testing, what is the baseline for cognitive ability, physical or visual challenges and executive functioning?
- 3. Motivation:** Is there motivation to learn to drive? Driving can often be challenging and at times, scary. The individual must want to do it.

As for motivation, that comes from within the individual with ASD and comes when the individual is ready. There are some practices families can utilize to assist an individual with ASD develop motivation.

- Are they experiencing loneliness and feel apart from their typical peers, especially after high school? Point out driving allows them to make plans without needing to consider a ride
- Many jobs require reliable transportation. A license opens the door to many career opportunities
- Do you have hobbies? A drivers license would allow you to drive to events like video game tournaments, festivals and other things you enjoy doing

There is quite a bit of "soul searching" that needs to be done by both families and individuals before deciding that they are ready to begin learning to drive. We realize that the inability for a young adult to drive affects families in all sorts of ways.

In a report dated September 2015, 72% of individuals with ASD and their parents had to miss out on self-activities due to lack of a ride. Some mode of transportation is essential for most everyone unless you live in an area with effective public transportation. The independence of a license is perhaps the easiest form of transportation that offers the most freedom.

However, with ASD, it isn't as easy as simply wanting to drive. Motivation matters, but pressuring someone towards driving can cause anxiety and meltdowns and actually push further away from driving. Talk about driving, but don't put unneeded pressure on the topic.

Parents that are unsure of their teen/young adult's ability to drive can set up an assessment by a driving certified Occupational Therapist, known as a CDRS. This 2-hour assessment tests the student's cognitive, physical, and visual abilities. After the test, you will receive a writeup and a specific plan to driving including recommendations to driving and/or transportation options. However, if you or your family member is certain that driving is an option, this step can be skipped. To find a list of local CDRS professionals, visit www.aded.net.

CHAPTER 2: YOUR ROLE AS A PARENT

So, your teen/young adult wants to drive.
Should they? Are you more afraid than they are?
Why are you afraid?

The Next Street's Driving with ASD Workshop is held regularly and includes a training program for Parents. If you are able, you should take part to get good information and meet other parents going through this process. Visit autism.thenextstreet.com to find the schedule of workshops and sign up.

Every individual with ASD is different and there is no magic age to start the driving process.

Some want to and need to learn how to drive. However, choosing not to drive is a valid choice.

There may be no guarantee that your son or daughter with ASD will learn to drive even if they meet all of the previously mentioned criteria. Autism is complex and, as Andrew Arboe says, life is all about the struggle. The most important thing for a parent to remember is not to pressure your son or daughter into driving if they aren't ready. They will get to a point where they are self-motivated and desire that independence. Pressuring them to get there before they are ready will only slow the process. This creates a power struggle and a contentious dynamic between the new driver and you.

Remember, your driving behavior is going to be imitated. You should drive how you expect your young adult to drive. If you don't want them to use their phone while driving, you can't use your phone while driving. If you want them to go the speed limit, you must go the speed limit. They are watching you and will mimic your behavior.

General Concerns:

- Safety concerns for children with ASD not being able to use transportation modes other than being in a car or school bus
- Lack of affordable transportation options
- Lack of available options and said options are reserved for older adults
- Lack of travel building skills during child's schooltime
- Exclusion of this topic during the IEP



AN ACTIVITY TO HELP WITH MOTIVATION

At The Next Street, we recommend passenger seat driving to people that are on the edge of wanting to drive but are still nervous. This helps someone get used to driving without being in the driver's seat. Have your new driver sit in the front passenger seat. Do not allow them to use their phone or devices. Ask them to give you driving directions to your destination, almost like they are the GPS. "Take the next left turn." "There is a red light ahead, make sure you come to a complete stop." If they miss things, point them out. At first attempt, they will miss a lot. But after practice, they'll start to widen their visibility and have a clear understanding of the rules of the road. Now, the driver's seat doesn't seem so frightening.

CHAPTER 3: GETTING STARTED...WHAT IS NEXT?

You and your family member have determined that they are ready to go on the journey of learning to drive. What happens next? Every state has different guidelines for assessing, permits and driving tests. Please visit the Department of Motor Vehicles in your state to confirm driving guidelines. If you live in New England, access The Next Street to find out about driving resources for your family member.

Step 1: Parents unsure if their teen/young adult can drive can set up an assessment by a certified Occupational Therapist. This 2-hour assessment tests the student's cognitive, physical, and visual abilities. After the test, you will receive a write-up and a specific plan for driving. The write-up includes driving and/or transportation recommendations. This step can be eliminated if you believe your child on the spectrum is fully capable and ready to begin practice driving. To find a local driving rehab facility, visit www.aded.net.

Step 2: Take one of The Next Street's Driving with ASD Workshops. They are held virtually with a live instructor and will focus on the driving theory that is

specific to a new driver with ASD. Topics include Sensory Issues and Driving, Driving Disruptions and Anxiety, For Parents Session, and Interacting with the Police. This virtual program covers driving basics and can be taken regardless of the State you live in.

Step 3: Obtain a Driver's Permit. Different states will have different requirements to complete the Driver's Permit. As an example: In Connecticut, you must complete a 25-question multiple choice test at a Department of Motor Vehicle branch. Please locate the state motor vehicle department in your state for more specific information. It is often found that while the content of the test is not challenging for the new driver with Autism, the environment of the DMV can be problematic. At worst, it could trigger a sensory overload. The DMV can be filled with numerous sensory elements like the noises of the room, people everywhere doing small talk, the lights being too bright. Accommodations may vary in each DMV location, but all DMV's will make accommodations upon request.

Step 4: Practice, Practice, Practice. You may have the assessment, you have the permit, so the next step is Driver's Education and practice. Each state has different driving school requirements, and often they vary for teenagers and adults. Even if your new driver is over 18 years old, we recommend holding them to the teen new driver standards in each state. The Graduated Licensing Laws that many states now have in place help assure safety for all new drivers, regardless of age.

Think of driving like learning to play the piano. You work with a professional instructor to learn the skill, then practice on your own to master the skill. Learn, practice, master, progress, repeat. If being behind the wheel makes you nervous, that's ok! Start slow in controlled environments, like big empty parking lots. Once comfortable, move to back roads at low speeds. Practice managing your speed, road positioning, and following the rules. Then progress to higher speed, single lane roads. After you master this, try multi-lane roads to practice lane changes and lane markings. The final step is the highway. Don't rush! If it takes you months or years to master the parking lot, that's ok!

A driver's license means so much more than being able to drive. It represents freedom, independence and is a sign of adulthood. For people with Autism Spectrum Disorder, driving may seem out of reach. We are excited to introduce you to our program that helps someone with ASD go through all of the steps to safely drive on their own.

autism.thenextstreet.com

CHAPTER 4:

DRIVING TIPS TO MANAGE ANXIETY

Learning how to drive for a neurotypical teen or young adult can be anxiety provoking. For the individual with ASD, it can be debilitating. Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder can have challenges in many areas including social interaction, motor skills, sensory processing, and executive functioning.

Planning for potential sensory issues inside the car will go a long way to alleviate some anxiety so the individual can concentrate on learning the rules of the road. Driving is unpredictable. But you can prepare for all of the unpredictable things by talking about them, creating a script and having a plan. Getting stuck in traffic can be awful. Getting stuck in traffic for the first time for a person with ASD without ever thinking about traffic as a disruption can lead to an awful meltdown. Create a script that works for you.

Individuals on the autism spectrum often thrive with routines and schedules. Practicing driving in regular, routine settings will be helpful. Include “priming” which is where you let the individual know what is expected for that day including any driving training or practice.

Individuals on the autism spectrum often have special interests and utilizing their interests to translate into driving skills could also be helpful and useful for letting the individual get used to the car. As an example, if you love playing video games, try listening to video game music while you drive.

Control may be important for you. While many elements of driving can't be controlled, many can. If you find yourself in an uncontrollable situation, like traffic, focus on the things you can control. Items you can control inside the car include:

- Seat positioning
- Car's temperature
- Distractions, such as your phone's notifications

- Radio volume and the music that is played
- Car cleanliness
- Mirror positioning
- Emergency kit in the car
- Seatbelt tension or comfortable fabric around seatbelt
- Passenger distractions

Items that you will not be able to control and need to have a plan for:

- Oncoming headlights
- Outside lights like streetlamps
- Construction sites
- Sirens
- Traffic and detours
- Other drivers' behaviors
- Police interaction

Developing a plan to assist your family member with ASD before and during initial training will help the individual have better outcomes. Consider using ASD in a positive way. Not all individuals with ASD will have anxiety and those that do will suffer in different ways and intensities. Teaching anxiety coping mechanisms will be vital in learning to drive and these newly learned skills can translate into other areas of their lives.

- Work on areas to improve such as executive functioning
- Autistic individuals thrive with routines and schedules. Use this to their benefit
- Anxiety strategies like priming is where you let the person know what is expected in a day. While some things can't be controlled or planned for, they can be expected. If you drive during rush hour, there will likely be traffic. Encountering a construction site is inevitable. Help your new driver by preparing them for these uncontrollable but inevitable scenarios
- If possible, use your individual's special interest to enhance driving. It is also perfect for letting the individual be used to the car. Example: play video game music as you drive if you love video game music or have a plush nearby while you drive

THINGS TO REMEMBER WHEN SUPPORTING AND TEACHING AN INDIVIDUAL ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM TO DRIVE:

- Have a calm voice and do not ever shout at the individual
- Understand that the individual is trying as hard they can to understand. Please be patient
- Start at a parking lot and get them used to the car first. Once that is finished, have them start making small trips like coffee shops, etc.
- Consider using cones or other markers to assist with teaching parking skills
- If possible, ask the individual to drive to school or work following the same streets as these short trips can boost self-confidence
- Strive to have clear and consistent communication on directions. Having those trips over weeks can boost self-confidence



CHAPTER 5:

GETTING STARTED WITH DRIVING STRATEGIES

When you begin driving, you want to start in slow, controlled environments and progress as your confidence and skill levels grow. Go to a large, preferably empty parking lot. Start by introducing accelerating, braking and turning. Allow the new driver to get a feel for the wheel.

As a coach, you have to do your best to NEVER YELL! Stay calm and collected and compliment the new driver as much as possible. Once the new driver gets a feel for these basic skills, you can start to do some parking maneuvers. Pull into a space and have them check their positioning in the space. Back out of the space and try again in a different space. Just keep repeating these actions over and over.

From the parking lot, your next step is low speed, flat back roads with very limited traffic. Here you can practice lane positioning and speed control. If you can find a neighborhood that is a block or a circle that you can drive around multiple times, even better. Ask the new driver to describe what they see and make sure that they're noticing everything that you notice.

Once your new driver is feeling comfortable in a controlled neighborhood, you can move onto a higher speed, but still single lane, road. These roads will also test speed control (bonus points if you can include speed control on hills) and lane positioning. You will also now encounter other vehicles, and will have the opportunity to see how your new driver reacts to oncoming traffic, traffic ahead or cars in the rear view. Remember, you can always grab the wheel!

The next step is multi-lane roads and urban driving. Don't move onto the highway yet, but find a good area to learn about lane changes, lane markings and flows of traffic. Left turns are especially tricky for a new driver, so be sure to test your new driver's ability to choose the right lane to turn from and turn into and understand how the traffic light system works.

Finally, the highway. Everyone dreads the highway with a new driver, but at this point, they should be more than ready. To start, we recommend choosing a highway that isn't ridiculously congested and is manageable. The best way to get started is to enter and exit the highway multiple times. Get on one exit and get off the next. Repeat. Once the driver can show they can get up to speed, and can get back off the highway, you can start to practice lane changes.

For the purpose of this book, we just illustrated about 50 hours' worth of needed practice in 5 paragraphs. While this is over simplified, driving truly is simple. Driver training curriculums have been nearly the same for over 50 years. The most important thing is to give your new driver your full time and attention while they are practicing. Turn off your phone, eliminate distractions and recognize that while your new driver may be in the driver seat, you are equally in control of the situation.

Also, don't go this alone. Professional driving schools are outstanding resources and should be your partner in this process. An instructor can give your new driver the basic skills, and then it is simply up to you to provide the practice. Think of driving like you would learning a musical instrument. An instructor teaches you for an hour or 2, and then you take weeks to practice what you've learned. On your next lesson, you learn the next set of skills.

Finally, with driving, experience matters. Allow your new driver every opportunity to drive with you. When you run errands, ask your new driver to take you there. Every chance that you can give your new driver to drive with you will introduce them to new experiences and expand their knowledge base on how to handle those scenarios.

Obviously, ASD can add a layer of complexity to driver training. What a neurotypical young adult may do in 3-4 months could possibly take a new driver with ASD 12-18 months. That's ok. Take your time, be supportive and in time, they can get there.



CHAPTER 6: THE ROAD TEST

The final step will be a 20-30 minute road test. This road test is going to be a slightly different experience in every state and every country, but the basic premise will be consistent: a new driver needs to prove they have enough practical driving skill to safely drive to a representative of the State or licensing authority.

For any new driver, but especially a new driver on the autism spectrum, you want to do all you can to set yourself up to be successful. Eliminate possible stressful situations before your test day. For example, if you are in a place where you need to use your own car for testing, be sure that your car is street legal and well maintained before bringing it to your test. You can't have on any warning lights on the dashboard, and the vehicle will need to pass a visual safety inspection before it goes out on the road.

One of the biggest points of anxiety we hear about is fear of the inspector. Remember, the inspector isn't out to fail you. Nearly every inspector we have dealt with in every state we work in wants to pass their students. However, they all take safety of the roads seriously and won't license someone they don't feel can safely operate. Don't be afraid of the person. If you are willing to disclose your autism to an agent, that's completely acceptable. If there are accommodations that will help you, request them. A licensing agency likely won't change the difficulty of the test, but they may alter the way that they communicate with you. As an example, we will often explain to an inspector that a client needs to bring their plush on the driving test.

In many states, driving schools are permitted to assist in the road test process. If this is allowed in your state, it is a worthwhile service. The driving schools will have relationships with the testing agencies and likely will have insight into testing routes and inspector desires.

HERE ARE A FEW MORE DRIVING TEST TIPS:

- Have the student practice driving around the location where the testing will take place to familiarize him/her/they to the roads
- Watch YouTube videos of road tests in your state. There are many that have the camera on the entire test, and these can be useful tools to incorporate into the practice
- The biggest reasons for failing a test are left turns (lane choice, traffic signals), failed parking maneuvers and speed control. Assure you have these down before you test

CHAPTER 7:

LIFE AFTER A LICENSE

Woohoo! You passed and now you have your license. This means you get unfettered access to the roads, right? By law, maybe. But we **STRONGLY** recommend you go slow.

All of the practice you have done so far has been with a coach or guide in the passenger seat. Now you get to drive alone. Don't go ripping down the highway on your first day. Just as you progressed slowly in practice, you should progress slowly driving alone.

Preparing for Interactions with Police

Most drivers find being pulled over by the police very anxiety producing. Individuals on the spectrum will need additional training on how to interact with the police. There are many resources available to teach individuals on the spectrum about to interact with the police. You can find some here:

- autisticadvocacy.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/PL-Police-Violence-Toolkit.pdf
- autismriskmanagement.com/downloadable-resources
- debbaudtlegacy.com/autism-decision-drive

Most states have resources to assist the autism community with Police Interactions. The Connecticut Department of Motor Vehicles with the help of key legislators and autism advocates created the "Blue Envelope". The "Blue Envelope" was created to enhance communication between a police officer and a driver with autism spectrum disorder. The purpose of the envelope is to have the driver place their insurance card, registration, and driver license in it, so they can hand it to the officer during a traffic stop. On the outside of the envelope is helpful tips and instructions for both the officer and driver on how to successfully communicate with each other.

You can request a copy of these envelopes from CT DMV or The Next Street website:

- portal.ct.gov/DMV/Licenses/Licenses/Autism-awareness
- portal.ct.gov/-/media/DMV/Blue-envelope-contact-card.pdf
- <https://autism.thenextstreet.com>

Even if your state doesn't have a program, you can create your own "Blue Envelope." This is a silent queue to inform the police that you have a special communication style. We also recommend going to meet with your local police department. Introduce the new driver, let them talk to the police and help the police get to know them. This will build some level of comfort and understanding. Most departments have a Community Partner or some role in the department for exactly this reason. Call your local department (not 911, the non-emergency number) and request a meeting.



Visit our Helpful Articles section on The Next Street Driving with Autism Spectrum Disorder page for more specific information about sensory effect while driving, disruptions, anxiety and meltdowns and getting pulled over.

**[autism.thenextstreet.com/
driving-with-asd](http://autism.thenextstreet.com/driving-with-asd)**

CHAPTER 8:

FINANCIAL PLANNING AND DRIVING

There are many financial considerations to understand when an individual with ASD starts to drive. Some considerations include: Deciding to buy a car, choosing a car, buying new or used, credit score, gas pricing, financing your purchase, insurance.

Choosing a Car

Sometimes your parents or siblings may give you a car after you obtain your license. If the individual does not have access to a car, you may have to buy a car yourself. Will you or the individual be able to afford a vehicle? When considering this option, here are some things to consider:

- Evaluate your spending habits and your job's income and develop a budget
- Check your credit. There are many ways to build new credit and repair damaged credit
- If you or the individual cannot afford to buy a car now, you can research other transportation options for your area while you plan to save money

The car model will be important to explore. Look at all models including smaller compact cars, mid-size cars, larger cars or SUV's. Each model will have pros and cons and could contribute to either a positive or negative driving experience for the individual.

There will be price differences between models along with if you are buying new or used. Research model performance, safety features, gas mileage and, if used, wear and tear and how has it been maintained.

Explore leasing versus buying. Buying will have higher monthly costs, but you end up owning it and you do not have to worry about mileage. Leasing will have lower monthly payments, but it will take years to own it. There are also yearly mileage limits.

Financing Your Purchase

If you or the individual cannot pay for a car in full, you have the option to finance. Financing means that you sign a contract to pay off the purchase price of your car over an agreed-upon amount of time. There will be interest charges.

Good credit scores can help you qualify for a car loan and other financing like renting an apartment, buying a house, or getting a phone service. Factors that affect these credit scores are debt, credit amounts, credit card and payment history, and public accounts. Consider using low limit credit cards to improve credit history and pay on time, pay loans and bills on time and by having "healthy debt."

Insurance for the Vehicle

There are many types of car insurance plans. Comparing different insurance companies, their customer service, pricing, and coverage will be a beneficial exercise for the individual. You can compare prices yourself online, or use a financial professional to do the work for you. This is usually a free service. Here are a few options for insurance coverage:

Mandatory

- Bodily Injury Liability. Covers costs of injury and death
- Property Damage Liability. Covers cost for damage to property done by you

Often Required

- Medical Payments. Covers cost of medical expenses
- Uninsured Motorist. Covers cost if the other driver is uninsured

Optional

- Collision. Covers cost of damage to your car caused by you (often required by loan lenders)
- Comprehensive. Covers cost of damage caused
- Glass. Separate coverage for windows and windshield

The amount and type of coverage will depend on factors specific to each individual, the type of car they drive, where and how much they drive, and state insurance law.



OTHER FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS TO BUDGET FOR:

The cost of gas.

- Evaluate how many miles a week the individual will be driving, determine the gas mileage and set a gas budget for the month
- Compare the prices for each location in your town. You can pay at the pump or in the store
- Some grocery stores can offer gas savings through their store program

The cost of maintenance.

- Every vehicle will need at least some maintenance to keep it in the best possible condition
- Oil changes and standard inspections
- Have an emergency fund set aside for unplanned maintenance

For more assistance on financial planning for young adults with ASD and their families, visit our friends at Planning Across the Spectrum, specialists in neurodiverse financial planning.





**THERE MAY BE
NO GUARANTEE
THAT THIS MAY
WORK, BUT LIFE
IS ALL ABOUT THE
STRUGGLE.**

~ANDREW ARBOE

CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION

The Next Street hopes you found this Resource Guide informative. Many individuals on the autism spectrum can learn to drive successfully with the right support but remember, choosing not to drive is also a valid choice. If you found this guide to be overwhelming and scary, it may not be the right time for you to drive, and that's ok! Revisit this guide every few months and see if your excitement builds. Many of our clients with ASD are in their mid to late 20's, some of our clients are in their 50's! Just because you aren't ready now doesn't mean you won't be ready one day.

If you read this guide and you are excited to get driving, excellent! Follow the tips and tricks in here. As you know, every person's experience with ASD is unique. The most important thing is self-awareness, and if you are willing, communicating your needs to everyone on your driver training team. We are here to help in your journey. If you are in the northeast, we welcome you to our neuro-diverse driving school program. If you are outside of the northeast, our Webinar Series on Driving with ASD is open for all and will help go into great detail on the subject matter from this guide. You can visit us anytime at autism.thenextstreet.com.

Best of luck to you and your new driver.

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