

Parental support is key when autistic adolescents want to learn to drive

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Autistic adolescents need the support of their parents or guardians to prioritize independence so that they are prepared for learning to drive, according to a study of specialized driving instructors who have worked specifically with young autistic drivers. These findings were compiled by researchers at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP) and recently published in the journal *Autism in Adulthood*.

Driving instructors also emphasized the need to develop and refine [best practices](#) to guide assessment and delivery of highly individualized instruction for autistic adolescents.

The study was conducted by a multidisciplinary team of researchers from CHOP's Center for Injury Research and Prevention, Center for Autism Research, and Division of Emergency Medicine, as well as the University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing and the Virginia Tech Transportation Institute (VTTI), as part of a five-year study aimed at understanding mobility issues for autistic adolescents funded by the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) at the National Institutes of Health (NIH). This is the first paper published as part of the study.

"Through our interviews with specialized driving instructors, we learned they believe [parents](#) are a critical partner in preparing for and undertaking independent driving," said Rachel K. Myers, Ph.D., lead author of the study and scientist at the Center for Injury Research and Prevention at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP). "Instructors recommend that parents help their children develop independent life skills, including the use of alternative forms of transportation such as bicycling or mass transit, and to practice pre-driving skills, such as navigation, before undertaking on-road driving lessons."

Driving instructors are an important resource for

families, especially for those with autistic adolescents learning to drive. However, because not much is known about the specific experience of teaching autistic adolescents how to drive, this limits the ability to provide adolescents and families with proper guidance preparing for the learning-to-drive process. To help bridge this gap, researchers conducted in-depth interviews with specialized driving instructors who had experience working with autistic adolescents and young adults. This is the first study to examine the process and experience of driving instructors who provide behind-the-wheel training specifically for this population.

The study revealed a set of common themes that underscored the importance of parents of autistic adolescents in preparation for the learning-to-drive process, with driving instructors viewing parents as essential partners in supporting their efforts in teaching driving skills and promoting independence. Participating instructors said parents can support and prioritize independence by encouraging their autistic adolescents to develop life skills, such as mowing the lawn, cooking, and taking public transportation, before learning to drive.

Although the driving instructors identified a need to develop and refine best practices for assessment and instruction, they recognized that specific approaches must be tailored to meet the unique needs of each autistic adolescent driver, reflecting the spectrum that affects each [adolescent](#) differently. Other suggestions from the instructors involved in this study included using of state-level vocational rehabilitation services to provide [financial support](#) for instruction, identifying and promoting prerequisite life skills prior to undertaking driving, parent-supervised driving instruction in partnership with professional driving instruction, and tailoring instruction to address the particular needs of learner drivers.

"What these specialized driving instructors told us

about the disconnect between driving and other [life skills](#) was surprising," said Benjamin E. Yerys, Ph.D., study author and psychologist at the Center for Autism Research at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. "Some parents may not let their autistic adolescents use a stovetop oven, but are asking if their teens are ready to drive. Whether or not their children decide to drive, parents should encourage greater independence by encouraging them to get around on their own. Traveling independently by driving or other modes of transportation is key to continuing their education, working, and staying connected with friends and family."

Obtaining a driver's license is a major milestone in the transition to adulthood. This milestone increases the independence and mobility of adolescents, which can potentially lead to improved access to educational, occupational training, social, and community engagement opportunities. According to previous CHOP research, nearly one-third of autistic adolescents obtain a driver's license by the time they are 21 years old, which may improve their ability to transition into independent adulthood.

More information: Rachel K. Myers et al, Teaching Autistic Adolescents and Young Adults to Drive: Perspectives of Specialized Driving Instructors, *Autism in Adulthood* (2019). [DOI: 10.1089/aut.2018.0054](#)

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