

# DRIVING with ASD



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## **DRIVING with ASD: A DEFINITE POSSIBILITY BECOMES A REALITY** **One Family's Story** *by Carole Kalvar*

Like most kids on Long Island, my son began learning to drive at 16, as soon as he was eligible to get a learner's permit. He attended the regular driver's education class with other 16 to 18 year-olds at his high school. He got limited behind-the-wheel driving instruction while in the car with 4 other kids, maybe about 20 minutes per week with the high school driving instructor. My husband and I also took time to teach our son how to drive and to practice driving with him. There were a couple of minor mishaps on the road which set everyone's nerves on edge and it just wasn't clear to us that he was acquiring the skills needed to be a successful driver. But my son wanted to drive. He wanted to drive more than anything else in the world. It took three failed road tests before my husband and I reconsidered driver's education for our son.

My son was diagnosed at 15 with High Functioning Autism but had been receiving Special Ed services since 5<sup>th</sup> grade for Attention Deficit Disorder. Perhaps he, like so many individuals with special needs, needed specialized instruction and a professional instructor who had expertise in teaching driving to individuals with learning differences. We also needed to finally put to rest our questions about whether David had the neurological capacity to acquire the skills needed to drive. Like all parents whose adolescent children get behind the wheel of a car we were apprehensive but because of our son's challenges there were additional concerns. Did his neurological differences preclude his ability to drive? Would he have to confront this possibility and the overwhelming disappointment of giving up his dream of being a driver and having a car?

In their article, *RULES OF THE ROAD: DRIVING AND ASD*, Teresa Foden, and Connie Anderson, Ph.D., present a comprehensive neurological profile of individuals with ASD and how their cognitive, perceptual and behavioral differences may impede their acquisition of driving skills. They argue for the development of techniques to address the specific neurological challenges of ASD. Difficulties with imitation, coordination and planning necessitate analyzing and breaking down skills into smaller components and allowing more time for mastery. Research suggests that the use of visual strategies might enhance rapid decision-making, a critical skill for drivers, especially when there is the tendency, as with ASD, to focus on details rather than the larger visual field. Just as individuals on the spectrum have a harder time interpreting "body language" they are more likely to miss behavioral cues or misinterpret the driving behavior of other people sharing the road. They may be less likely to infer the frustration of a tailgater or the hesitancy of an elderly driver. Think of the range of behaviors exhibited by other drivers with whom we share the road. The authors present the interesting concept of teaching the "body language of traffic" just as we teach those with ASD about gestures, postures and expressions.

Tricia Coppola-Passariello, the Connecticut Easter Seals Mobility Center Coordinator, in an article entitled “*When is the right time to DRIVE?*” suggests some activities that future drivers can engage in that may strengthen important skills like eye-hand-body coordination, perceptual skills, judgment, depth perception, visual attention and tracking. She suggests riding a bike, driving a golf cart or lawn mower, playing baseball or ring toss, performing mazes or using remote controlled cars or video games and word finding puzzles. She also recommends practicing being an active passenger, noticing traffic and safety hazards as well as when conditions are right for changing lanes and making turns, reading and learning road-signs, anticipating changing road conditions and being attentive to the behavior of other drivers.

I had some additional concerns about my son’s ability to handle driving. I was worried about his ability to communicate effectively, regulate his emotions, and maintain the focus needed to drive for any length of time. How might he handle being involved in an accident? Would he be overcome by emotion when in an unfamiliar or potentially dangerous situation? Could he undertake a trip to a new destination and focus on the directions to find it? Would he be able to come up with a plan if he got lost? Some of these issues are resolved for all drivers with maturity and experience but was it even wise to put him in these potentially problematic situations? We needed an expert and objective opinion so that we could better manage our expectations for our son’s future.

At an AHA support meeting I met a parent whose child had a comprehensive driver’s training evaluation at Abilities, Inc. in Albertson, NY ([Abilitiesinc.org](http://Abilitiesinc.org)). Her child went on to complete a series of adapted driver lessons and successfully passed the road test. I did a little research and then asked our school district if we could incorporate a Driver’s Assessment into my son’s IEP and my request was approved.

The Drivers Assessment as conducted at Abilities, Inc. is highly technical and comprehensive. It includes measures of cognition, perception, frustration tolerance, spatial relationships, hand-eye coordination, visual acuity, reaction time, etc. Specialized equipment is used in the process. It generally takes 2 to 2 1/2 hours with additional breaks and downtime. Ed Colverd, the director of the Adapted Driving Program at Abilities, Inc. says he has had no problems administering the assessment to those with ASD. Ms. Coppola-Passariello, points out that the test provides “a vast amount of information about a student’s readiness to drive, and can help determine the most appropriate next step,” which might be adapted driver training or a readiness skills-building program or alternative travel training if driving is not a realistic goal.

Parents should work with their school district’s Committee on Special Education (CSE) to incorporate driving assessments and instruction into their child’s IEP. This is a recommendation from Barbara Weisberg, a supervisor at the Garden City office of ACCES, the New York state agency for Adult Career and Continuing Education Services (the agency previously known as VESID). Many school districts will pay for this assessment and adapted training if they offer driver’s education to the general school population. If the potential driver is no longer in school, ACCES may provide funding for the assessment and lessons. The individual would have to be an active ACCES consumer, having completed an application and found to be eligible for services. Funding is provided if the consumer is able to derive a career or employment benefit from Adapted Drivers Training.

Many parents choose to pay privately for the assessment and specialized driving lessons. Abilities, Inc. has been arranging fees for these services based on a sliding scale. In a recent conversation with Mr. Colverd, a new fee schedule for these services may soon be available. He also informed me that there are currently openings available for assessments and training. You can contact him at (516) 465-1506, or [ecolverd@abilitiesinc.org](mailto:ecolverd@abilitiesinc.org)

My son completed the 2 hour evaluation and it was determined that he could in fact be a successful driver. We then registered for a series of adapted driving lessons. Mr. Colverd, his instructor at Abilities, is still teaching driving to individuals with a broad range of physical and cognitive differences. With over 30 years of experience, Mr. Colverd is aware of how his students with ASD differ from those who are “neurotypical.” He finds that his students with ASD must **learn** that driving is a social activity; we’re not alone out there on the road. He was always quite positive about my son’s abilities and, most importantly, he instilled confidence and self esteem. While the Adapted Driver Program is available in Nassau County through Abilities, Inc., in Suffolk County an approved Driver Rehabilitation Specialist is available at the Eastern Suffolk BOCES.

Just a reminder: exercise a great deal of patience with your new driver with ASD. We found that our son needed lots of rehearsal and repetition to lessen anxiety before undertaking trips to new locations but he was brave enough to tackle the challenge. He was so motivated to achieve these goals.

My son passed his fourth road test. I don’t know who shouted louder when the road test examiner gave him the thumbs up. This was a dream realized. I was so thrilled to share his joy. Through the 10 years that he’s been on the road my son may have required more repetition of “what to do when” scenarios but he’s learned to be a successful driver. He’s encountered many problematic situations. He’s gotten lost, been stopped for a minor infraction by the police, even been involved in an accident on the road, situations nearly every driver will confront during a lifetime of driving. He’s always found a way to handle the situations well. We are so proud.

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Her 26 year old son, who has high functioning autism, lives and drives on Long Island*

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