

*Ask the Experts Column – November-December 2003*

## **Teaching People on the Autism Spectrum to Drive a Car**

By Kathie Harrington

Question: How do I know if my child is ready to learn to drive a car? Shawn is really interested, but I'm not sure where to start?

In the March-April, 2003 issue of *Autism Asperger's Digest*, Temple Grandin stated that she has been driving a car since she was 18 years old and that, "Yes," people with autism can learn to drive. Ms. Grandin had wonderful advice from the perspective of a person with autism who IS driving. But you pose a good question: how, exactly, do you get from idea to action, and actually teach driving skills? This article will share useful tips and strategies to help you do just that.

Perhaps some of you parents are thinking, "impossible, unrealistic or just too scary" - and just perhaps, you're right. Not all people on the autism spectrum should be taught to drive. Whether or not a person possesses the physical, intellectual and emotional readiness that is required is a judgment call each parent will need to make. As Ms. Grandin states, "the parents' decision is no different for a person on the spectrum than it would be a typical child."

But perhaps you are thinking, "maybe": maybe it is possible to allow my child this level of independence and responsibility, with the proper instruction. After all, people with autism adhere strictly to rules we teach them – a positive trait for learning to drive. Once taught, they would likely follow the rules-of-the-road better than about 90% of the drivers do in my city of Las Vegas, NV!

To help in assessing whether or not a person with autism is ready to learn to drive, parents should ask themselves the following questions:

- Is my child ready for the responsibility of driving?
- If finances are in question, can he/she afford the payments/insurance/upkeep of a vehicle?
- Does my child have the receptive language skills to learn the appropriate vocabulary, problem solving, predicting, and sequencing that is necessary for the highway?
- Does my child have sufficient expressive language skills to deal with other drivers, public officials, and people at the gas station?
- Does my child exhibit pragmatic (social) language skills that are necessary for learning road safety? What about turn taking, attending, initiating, responding to other's actions, responses to noise and visual rote stimuli?
- Is my child emotionally stable; how does he/she react to something that is not routine? How does he/she respond to anger and what ways does he/she manage that anger?

Only the parent can answer these questions and make the proper determination, not only for the child's safety but also for the safety of others. It IS okay if your child never drives a car; independence might be better achieved for some by putting your energy into teaching the child to take a city bus or taxi. In reality, you have a limited amount of energy, time, and finances that need to be directed in the most beneficial way for your family.

If you've decided your child has the necessary skills to drive a vehicle, read on. Remember that everyone on the spectrum is different and that all strategies will not work with all people - that's life in any lane.

What qualities do parents need to teach their son or daughter to drive a car? Among them are PATIENCE, PERSISTENCE, CONSISTENCY, HUMOR, and a POSITIVE ATTITUDE. You might want to include professionals in your teaching program. Be sure to inform your child's teacher and speech/language pathologist so they can reinforce appropriate vocabulary, sequencing, predicting, turn taking, memory, map skills, telephone skills and problem solving - are important parts of being a safe, responsible driver. Also, plan ahead! It will probably take longer to teach a person with autism to drive than it would your typical son or daughter. As Temple mentioned in her article, you might need to break down individuals skills into separate teaching units for it to make sense.

The following list identifies resources and strategies you can use for teaching skills necessary for driving. This list is not all-inclusive. Be creative and find what works for your child and family.

***Vocabulary***

brochures from car dealers  
auto mechanic books  
state driving test booklet  
insurance policies

***Predicting***

what comes next games  
what is missing games  
what if . . . situations and games

***Sequencing***

maps (before this street - after that street)  
pictures of buildings and landmarks that will be passed in any given route

***Turn Taking***

board games such as Connect Four and Checkers (start with accuracy and then go for speed)  
Hot Wheels and small traffic signs to practice a variety of traffic situations such as: two- and four-way stops, yield signs, railroad crossings, etc.

***Memory***

state driving test booklets - repeat, repeat, repeat  
map reading skills  
bus routes

***Telephone***

a list of important people and numbers; to be kept in the car  
a local telephone book - teach how to use it

***Problem Solving***

Emphasize that although rules are good, they are often altered because of circumstances, and that other drivers might not choose to always follow them. Try to teach your child to be flexible and if necessary, to ALWAYS YIELD or pull over to the side of the road and wait.

Role-playing is a must for a variety of situations. Typical developing peers or siblings who have experience driving are beneficial for role-playing, games, and discussions of real life situations. However, the person with autism must take an active role in these activities in order for them to be productive. Involving the child's speech pathologist in role-playing is also a great tool for reinforcing social/pragmatic language skills. It gives opportunities for talking about feelings, motivations, and thoughts that the other drivers are experiencing (Theory of Mind).

Drivers on the spectrum are not likely to become aggressive drivers but they MUST know how to handle driving situations when others are aggressive. They must be taught that:

- **Safety is ALWAYS first**
- **Allow plenty of time to reach your destination**

- **When frustrated or angry, let it go and try to refocus your thoughts**
- **Pull out of the way of traffic and take deep breaths or employ other relaxing exercises that work for you**

People on the autism spectrum can learn to drive. They can be safe and prudent drivers. However, driving is not for everyone; the person with autism must have adequate skills that both they and YOU know are reliable. You, as parent, are in the driver's seat during this important decision making process. Also, keep in mind that teaching and learning is only one aspect of the situation; maintaining knowledge and skills over the long haul is what it is really all about.

Our son, Doug, is now 32 years old; he has driven since he was 18. Doug rarely drives over 35-40 miles per hour. He plans every lane change and turn before he leaves the house. He checks his seat position with a ruler every time he gets in the car. He turns his radio on only at stoplights. He hates to put the car in reverse (but does). Driving a car has given Doug a chance to be independent and responsible: he drives to work, the athletic club, the mall, and to be with friends and family.

I've tried to live my life by the following words: *"It might be insane to live with a dream, but it's madness to live without one."* (anonymous) At times autism may seem to be a killer of dreams, for you, your family, for the person with autism. Keep in mind that you are in charge of your dreams. Don't be afraid to make them come alive.

If you think your child is – or even might be - ready to learn to drive, then Ladies and Gentlemen, **START YOUR ENGINES!**

### **ABOUT DOUG TODAY**

Doug graduated from Chaparral High School, Las Vegas, NV at high noon in May of 1990. He graduated with a class rank of 72 out of 471 with a regular diploma. Doug attended the University of Nevada Las Vegas for two years where he was a member of the Star of Nevada Marching Band. Today, Doug is employed full time at a world-class resort on the Las Vegas Strip. He drives himself through the Las Vegas Valley traffic and explores new places from time-to-time. Doug sticks closely to his driving routines, as they are well-suited to his needs. We have taught Doug many driving strategies, but the ones he uses most are those he has taught himself.

### **BIO**

Kathie Harrington, M.A., CCC-SLP is a well-known international speaker and the mother of a grown son with autism. She is an accomplished author, having written *For Parents and Professionals: Autism* and *For Parents and Professionals: Autism in Adolescents & Adults* (both by LinguSystems, Inc. [www.linguisystems.com](http://www.linguisystems.com)), as well as numerous professional articles on autism, language development and poems. Kathie's short stories have appeared in the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* and the *Chocolate for a Woman's Soul* series.

Kathie provides speech therapy services, physical and occupational therapy as well as academic tutoring through her private practice, Good Speech, Inc., in Las Vegas, NV. She also serves on local and state teams for autism and consults to school districts and agencies. Kathie welcomes communication through her website: [www.kathiesgoodspeech.com](http://www.kathiesgoodspeech.com) or by email at [Kathieh@cox.net](mailto:Kathieh@cox.net).

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*Every time our son, Doug, gets into his car he uses a ruler to measure the distance between the steering wheel and his stomach. If it is not the exact measurement, Doug needs to adjust the seat to its precise 16<sup>th</sup> of an inch!*

*When I ride with Doug, I am not allowed to talk unless we are at a stoplight - hold that thought until the next light! He turns on his radio only at stoplights as well. This is an example of learning about your own style and using strategies that fit into your own life.*

*The temperature in Las Vegas teeters around 115-degrees many days in July. One day Doug drove to the athletic club about 3/4 of a mile from our home. He returned home exhausted and sweating – he had forgotten his billfold with his driver’s license and walked the trip home.*

*Doug usually drives 35 miles an hour when going to work. One morning he came home and announced, "Guess who I passed on the way to work this morning?" "Who could that be?" I questioned. "Grandma," proclaimed Doug, "but she was busy so I didn't wave."*

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### **Kathie's Top 10 Tips to the DRIVER**

1. **Use your eyes** - look around you. Be sure to look both right and left as well as straight ahead. Remember that the whole driving environment is important for your own safety as well as for the safety of others.
2. **Use your ears** - listen to all the sounds. You need to listen for horns, sirens, children's voices, and other vehicles. Listening is as important as seeing. **TURN YOUR RADIO OFF** so your ears can focus on what is important.
3. **Use your hands** - control your vehicle. Do not take your hands off your steering wheel unless you need to use a hand turn signal. Do not ever use a cellular phone while you are driving. If you need to make a phone call and have a cell, pull over to the side of the road or into a parking lot to make your call.
4. **Use your knowledge** - know what you need to do in a variety of situations. The best rules of the road will be learned from your Driver's Handbook. Study the rules and follow them. Remember, however, that all drivers do not follow all of the rules all of the time. This means you must be flexible in YOUR thinking and ability to adjust to something that another driver might do.
5. **Use your common sense** - what really feels right? Common sense means not always being able to follow the rules as they are printed in the Driver's Handbook. As in the example above, not everyone will do what YOU think they should. You must learn to adjust and follow what you feel is right for different situations.
6. **Use your positive attitude** - don't let other drivers make you mad. Always think positive and keep your temper under control. IF a situation arises that makes you upset, pull into the closest parking lot away from all traffic. Turn your engine off. Get out of your car and take some deep breaths. Do not get back into your car until you are calmed down.
7. **Use your strategies** - know what works best for YOU. This will be different from person to person. It is important to talk over different strategies with your parent/instructor and most importantly, to **KNOW YOURSELF**. Practice different strategies before deciding what works best for you.
8. **Use your sense of safety** - always put safety first. Safety is why you **MUST** learn to use your eyes, ears, hands, and strategies to be an effective driver. For instance, you never drive through a large area of standing water. You get out of the way of emergency vehicles. You use your emergency brake. In other words, learn the safety procedures from your Driver's Handbook and listen to your parent/instructor.
9. **Use your language skills** - predict, turn take, make choices and sequence events of the road. Predicting not only what you think you should do, but predicting what you think the other

driver **might** do is very important. Practice taking turns at stop signs, stop lights, railroad crossings, yield signs, passing signs, and street corners without any signs. Making choices and sequencing are constant parts of driving. Prepare yourself by writing out a route or taking a "dry run" with your parent/instructor.

10. **Use your best speed** - know what speed is comfortable for YOU. Never exceed the speed limit, but never go too slow for the traffic flow, either. If you are not comfortable driving fast enough to go on the freeways, **DO NOT USE THEM**. Find your most comfortable speed while you are practicing with your parent/instructor. Always follow the posted speed limit signs.

Two more VERY important points:

- Listen to your parent/instructor - they have experiences from which you can learn.
- Study the Driver's Handbook from your state. Learn the rules and then practice, practice, practice them before going on the roads.

### **Kathie's Top 10 Tips to the Parent/Instructor**

1. Teach rules of safety - always put safety first.
2. Teach patience and calmness in traffic.
3. Teach strategies that work best for the driver.
4. Teach what to do and who to call in an emergency; put it in writing and in the vehicle.
5. Teach a variety of situations through role-playing.
6. Teach rules that are appropriate for the road as well as to the individual.
7. Teach language as in turn taking, predicting, sequencing, and planning.
8. Teach how to anticipate before reacting in a variety of situations.
9. Teach the importance of focus and using all of your senses.
10. This last tip is simple: Practice. Practice. Practice. When you think you can't practice any more, think again!!