

EXPLORING THE DRIVING BEHAVIOR OF YOUNG NOVICE DRIVERS WITH AN AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER: A DRIVER INSTRUCTOR QUESTIONNAIRE.

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Background: Driving allows autonomy and permits maintenance of social- and work-related contacts. Nevertheless, adolescents and young adults with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) depend to a great extent on friends and family for their transportation needs. Although little research exists of driving ability in young novice drivers with ASD, Cox et al. (2012) surveyed parents/caregivers of adolescents and young adults, attempting, or previously attempting, to learn to drive. In comparison to relatively easier driving tasks (e.g., maintaining lane position), complex driving skills, such as merging into traffic or multi-tasking, were reported as being problematic for young novice drivers with ASD. Other reported difficulties were: interpreting the behavior of other road users, dealing with unexpected situations, and sustaining attention.

Objectives: This study, which is part of the ongoing Yes I Drive project, extends on Cox et al. (2012) by surveying driver instructors. Driver instructors are important sources of information and might be complementary to the opinion of parents/caregivers, by more objectively reflecting the teaching process.

Method: A web-based link of the survey was sent to Flemish driving schools in Belgium. Several questions queried the driver instructors' advice for teaching young novice drivers with ASD how to drive, and for improving the current driving education methods to better fit the needs of young novice drivers with ASD. Furthermore, respondents were asked to indicate whether specific characteristics, often associated with ASD, have an impact on the driving ability (e.g., 'difficulties with motor planning', 'difficulties with emotional self-regulation').

Results: A total of 52 driver instructors (40 males) acknowledged potential problems for teaching adolescents and young adults with ASD to drive. ASD related characteristics rated to have the highest impact on driving were 'Difficulty with concentration/attention', 'Difficulty with emotional self-regulation' and 'Difficulty with unexpected routine changes'. The least problematic (i.e., although still rated above average) ASD characteristics were 'Difficulty with motor planning' and 'Difficulty with sensory overstimulation'. Results however also showed that the relation between ASD and driving performance might not always be negative and can even be positive (e.g., a focus on details might be an asset). Advice for teaching young novice drivers with ASD to drive mainly focused on a need for structure, clarity, visual demonstration, practice and repetition. The reported diversity of young novice drivers with ASD, requiring an individualized teaching strategy, supports the current classification of autism as a "spectrum" disorder with ASD related symptoms and behaviors varying from person to person. In conclusion, and similar to Cox et al. (2012), the current results indicate that learning to drive presents a substantial challenge for young novice drivers with ASD. Confirmation based on opinions from the population of young novice drivers with ASD however is still lacking.

Key words: learner drivers, driver instructors, autism spectrum disorder