

ON THE ROAD WITH A DISABILITY

By Carrie Smoot

Every teenager looks forward to driving and planning all the exciting things that are possible when a car is available. When the teenager has a disability, however, confusion and uncertainties exist about whether the young person has the physical and sensory ability to drive. Information is critical.

THE DRIVING DECISION

"Many young people with disabilities can drive. They are able to use other skills, such as upper body strength, to compensate for their conditions," says Lynn Killiany, program supervisor for driver's education in Fairfax County Public Schools. Driver's education follows the U.S. Department of Education curriculum and is usually taught as part of the 10th-grade physical education class. Students entering the Fairfax County school system after the 10th-grade may take a computerized driver's education course. Fourteen hours of behind-the-wheel instruction is offered. Killiany says that before a student is licensed in Virginia, he or she has to complete 40 hours of driving with parents. Accommodations for behind-the-wheel instruction include hand controls, steering knobs and cushions to raise shorter people in the seats.

"Parents tend to be very good evaluators of their children's driving abilities, but may still not be sure," Killiany says. "The adaptive PE teacher may also be a valuable part of the team." If the school training does not answer questions and concerns, Killiany says, it might be better to have your teen attend a professional driver's education evaluation.

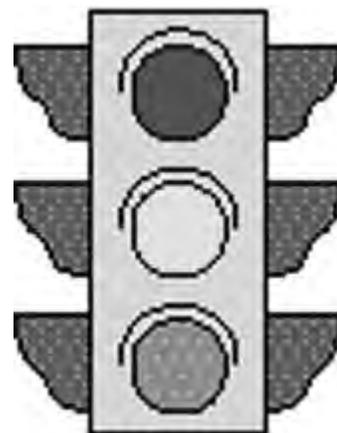
"The role that occupational therapists play in an adaptive driving program is to help develop compensatory strategies for driving and to help them select the appropriate vehicle and assistive technology," says Paige Moore, director of the occupational therapy program at Woodrow Wilson Rehabilitation Center in Fishersville, VA. The center owns four specially adapted cars and two vans for driving evaluations and behind-the-wheel practice around the facility grounds. Common adaptive devices include hand controls, lenses, extra mirrors on cars, a steering knob for better grip on the steering wheel, a left-foot accelerator, gas pedal and brake pedal extensions. Before trying the adapted vehicle, other tests and interviews have to be completed.

"First, we look at a person's visual acuity, the area they can see, their visual convergence, and their perception," Moore says. "Then we work on some cognitive tests, such as their ability to divide attention—a useful skill when trying to drive when friends are in the car talking to you.

Another important part of the process is the interview. "We want to get an idea of the teenager's driving experience with Mom and Dad and how that felt, if they have any fears or anxieties about driving, or any disability-related concerns. Then it's time to get on the road."

After the road test is completed, the occupational therapists will offer their assessments.

"In some cases we've had to tell the young person that he or she may not be a good candidate for driving right now, but that with a little more practice in some skill areas, they could get better. For others, we've



had to say that driving just isn't an option, and we put them in touch with public transportation in their areas. In rural Virginia, however, there isn't a lot to choose from," says Moore. "We've had some young people who've felt pressured to learn to drive, and if it turns out that they can't, it's a relief."

Moore offers suggestions for things parents and teens could work on to improve driving preparation skills. These include focusing better in class, trying to tune out any other distractions. Parents could also try giving teens chores while watching TV, helping them concentrate on two things at once. It may be that driving ability is good without the distractions of the radio, CDs, cell phones and friends, Moore says. So it's up to parents to enforce those restrictions.

"There's a wide range of how people with disabilities do with driving," says Kay Buchanan, a driving rehabilitation specialist at Woodrow Wilson who is certified by the Association for Driver Rehabilitation Specialists (ADED). "Some persons may require adaptive driving equipment—ranging from very simple to high tech, while others may need to learn adaptive driving techniques or simply have an extra amount of driver training and practice. "There are also some folks who simply cannot drive."

Buchanan says a lot of the teens Woodrow Wilson works with for

driver evaluations have limited awareness of the driving environment. "It can be helpful for the family member who is driving to sometimes provide a running commentary as to what they are doing and to ask the teen questions about what they see," she says.

Buchanan points out that the driving scenario in quiet, rural Fishersville is not the same as in a heavy-traffic suburban or urban area. "Our driver training with someone from a high-traffic area might include going with them to their home area one or two times to actually drive in that environment," she says. "I've also referred persons for driver training in their home area if the appropriate training is available there."

Teens and their families always ask about vehicle types, adaptive devices and funding, and whether someone else in the family can drive the vehicle. "With most adaptive driving equipment, someone else can still get in the vehicle and drive it with the standard equipment. As with all vehicles, regular maintenance is required with the van or car. In addition, you should see a National Mobility Equipment Dealers Association (NMEDA)-certified dealer for guidance and repairs of the adaptive devices. If the family is obtaining the vehicle through Department of Rehabilitative Services, they go through DRS' bidding process."

"Driving is one of the few times where a disability is irrelevant, because people can often drive in a vehicle suited to their needs in spite of a disability," says Dan Basore, director of the MossRehab Driving School in Philadelphia, PA. MossRehab serves approximately 1,000 people with disabilities a year through five programs in Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Delaware.

Basore believes it's critical for parents and teens to look ahead. "Think about driving as early as eighth or ninth grade to allow more planning time. School systems need to do a

better job of working with students with disabilities who want to learn to drive. It's important to ask questions early."

Parents can take an active role, he says, by helping teens learn the rules of the road, learning the state DMV manual and complying with DMV requirements and ensuring that their vision is the best it can be.

Basore says it's generally best to wait until after the driver's evaluation, learner's permit, license and additional training before buying and adapting a vehicle. If the family uses a driving school for additional training, he advises them to ask about the school's experience working with people with disabilities and the vehicles' adaptations. Projected time frames for success are also helpful, as well as whether parents can ride along during the training.

WHEN DRIVING ISN'T AN OPTION

Unfortunately, not everyone is able to drive a vehicle. "Telling someone they won't be able to drive, or won't be able to drive any longer, is the hardest part of the job," Dan Basore says. "Sometimes people are able to hire drivers or can use public transportation in their area, while others in rural areas with no transportation decide to move to larger cities. But for many, the overriding emotion is relief, because they have tried so hard and driving hasn't worked out."

Through Metrobus and Metrorail, the Washington Metropolitan Transit Authority (WMATA) provides an alternative for people with disabilities and others in the Greater Washington Metropolitan area who cannot drive. Rikki Epstein, ADA Project Officer in WMATA's Office of ADA Programs, says her office provides free Metrobus and Metrorail System Orientations upon advance request to individuals and groups in schools, travel trainers and people with disabilities just moving to the area. The training can take a couple hours or all day. A Metro

representative will help you plan your trip and ride with you, answering questions. They will also cover how to apply for a Reduced-Fare Program ID card, how to obtain a reduced-fare card and reduced-fare SmarTrip cards.

The Office of ADA Programs also provides various publications, including the new brochure "Tips for Riding Metro for People with Disabilities." Braille/Tactile Metrorail system maps and large-print newsletters, large-print Metro pocket guides and more are also available on request.

"We also want to tell people about the Metro Is Accessible Project," Epstein says. "A lot of people don't realize that features to help people with disabilities in the system also help everyone, such as the elevator signage, the wide fare gates, the flashing lights at the platform edge that let people know a train is coming, and the bumpy tiles in over 50 percent of the stations that let people who are blind know if they are too close to the platform edge. In addition, one hundred percent of rail cars are accessible and have rubber gap reducers, preventing wheelchair casters from being caught between the platform and trains. Trains also have barriers between the rail cars to help people who are blind orient themselves better when boarding." Epstein also mentions each station is equipped with a TTY for patrons who are deaf.

Epstein says that by 2005, 100 percent of buses will be accessible. Instead of buses with hydraulic lifts, all new buses purchased will have fold-out ramps. Other accessible features are the visual displays and audio announcements of major intersections, transfer points and bus stops. There are priority seats and two wheelchair securement areas in the front of the bus.

"Using the bus and Metro system can sometimes be overwhelming," says Epstein. "It just takes practice. The online Trip Planner and other online resources will help you find your way around."

ANOTHER POSSIBILITY FOR NON-DRIVERS

One other option for non-driving people with disabilities in the Washington, DC area is MetroAccess, the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority's paratransit service in Silver Spring, MD. LogistiCare, WMATA's transportation contractor, operates and maintains 198 vehicles (139 wheelchair-accessible vans and 59 sedans) and additional wheelchair lift-equipped vans and sedans not owned by the company. Local taxicabs, many accessible with fold-out ramps, are used for overflow trips. Reservations have to be made in advance; i.e., by 4:30 p.m. the day before the requested trip. Same-day requests are not accepted.

"MetroAccess is a shared ride, curb-to-curb transportation service where eligibility is determined through functional assessments by a physical or occupational therapist. It's not a cheap cab service. Passengers may be sharing rides with up to three people," says Michael Antique, acting director of MetroAccess. He adds that potential users must submit an application along with a health care professional's statement of disability. If approved, passengers are issued photo ID cards and they must present them when boarding. Personal care attendants may ride for free, while companions pay the fare.

"People are getting out into the mainstream more," Antique says. "At a cost of round trip, or twice the regular subway fare, it's affordable. MetroAccess cannot prioritize or ask the purpose of trips."

Antique says 14,000 subscribers live in all jurisdictions, and 8,500 are active MetroAccess users. He says the end of fiscal year 2004 (July 1, 2003 - June 30, 2004) showed trip growth of 1.1 million. "Growth had been constant at about 30 percent per year for two

or three years. Growth the last 18 months has been approximately 15 to 20 percent," Antique says.

For more effective scheduling, MetroAccess runs on a 30-minute window, arriving 15 minutes before or 15 minutes after the scheduled pickup time. Drivers are mandated to wait for passengers 10 minutes before calling to locate them.

While some disability groups and individuals with disabilities complain of poor service, Antique says service has improved and that the customer service office has received fewer complaints.

"We are constantly monitoring service," he says. "On June 27, 2004, MetroAccess began the pilot Free Ride Program, where MetroAccess users and a companion can ride free on Metrobus and Metrorail. Registration for the program is voluntary, but encouraged. To register for the program, individuals can call 301-562-5370. The program runs through December 31, 2005. Yes, it's an effort to cut costs, but we also want people to see that Metrobus and Metrorail are accessible."

Thomas Choman, chairman of the Fairfax Area Disability Services Board (DSB), says the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority could be providing better service. The Fairfax Area DSB is one of a network of advocacy groups created by the Commonwealth of Virginia to provide information and referral to people with disabilities in the community and to take concerns to local government. They are, however, barred from lobbying.

Choman says the Fairfax Area DSB chose transportation as one of its three major focus areas that affect the lives of people with disabilities. He notes that some Board staff and many area individuals have experienced problems using MetroAccess in particular. "MetroAccess is serving a need—people getting where they need to

go—and we're grateful for that, but service is deteriorating. The service needs to be more reliable and responsible. We want policies in place that will improve service," Choman says. "If you don't have a car, using private cabs or depending on family transportation is expensive. MetroAccess wait times are excessive—an hour or more sometimes. Parents are concerned about their kids being stranded without rides. Teenagers—and everyone else—with disabilities deserve access to the same activities as other people."

Choman says Metrobus and Metrorail also have room for improvement, describing what he calls inconvenient shuttles that transport people between Metro stops when elevators are broken, the out-of-service escalators and nonworking elevators. "If Metro truly wants to honor its slogan of 'Metro Opens Doors,' it will provide better service," he says. Choman advises people to write letters, make calls and send e-mails to inform WMATA of service comments, and then follow through on them. "Life does get busy for a lot of people, but this is the way change comes about," he says.

In today's world, mobility is important, but for those with disabilities, the complications can sometimes be overwhelming. However, it's important to know the options in order to make informed decisions. And in whatever mode of transportation is available, it's important to be out there. Armed with information, it may be possible for everyone to stay "on the road." ■

Carrie Smoot is a Northern Virginia freelance writer and a public transportation veteran. Her advice: Be organized and plan ahead. A positive attitude, sense of humor and a good book don't hurt, either.