

Driving school launches fleet of adapted vehicles

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Young Driver allows anyone from the age of 9 to get behind the wheel, including those with additional needs

The country's largest pre-17 driving school has revealed a brand new fleet of automatic vehicles, to allow all youngsters access to early driver tuition, even if they are unable to operate a conventional three pedal system.

Young Driver® has revealed that 10 brand new automatic Suzuki Swifts, with optional hand controls, will be joining the fleet, suitable for those with a wide range of physical disabilities and additional needs. Lessons in the adapted vehicles will be available at every event held at each of the scheme's 70 venues across Great Britain, with a minimum starting age of nine – a year earlier than was previously possible, due to the dimensions of the new Swifts.

Over the last 15 years, the programme has built up vast experience of teaching youngsters with additional needs. Lessons take place at private venues with a fully qualified instructor. Realistic road systems are created, including roundabouts and junctions, with space to practice specific manoeuvres and driving skills. Youngsters are able to take as much time as they need to get to grips with driving, with no pressure to pass tests.

The scheme regularly works with people who are blind, deaf, have prosthetic limbs, are in wheelchairs, or have learning disabilities. The scheme has also built

up a wealth of experience working with youngsters who are neurodiverse. There is no upper age limit – the lessons aren't restricted to under 17s – so Young Driver provides the opportunity to try driving to people of any age, who may not feel able or be allowed to take tuition on the road.

The specially adapted vehicles have a manual push/pull device next to the steering wheel, to enable drivers to control its speed, along with a steering ball, to allow the vehicle to be steered with one hand. The vehicles are dual controlled, ensuring an instructor is always able to take charge of the vehicle quickly and easily if needed.

“Because lessons take place on private property, the scheme is suitable for everyone – especially with the new adapted cars,” comments Ian Mulingani, managing director at Young Driver. “That includes those who aren't allowed or who feel unable to have lessons on the road, whatever their age. We have pupils, even ones into their old age, who will never be able to drive on the roads. They want to experience what it's like to drive a car, and we can make that happen in a safe and inclusive environment. Learning to drive is about more than just learning a set of skills to pass a test. It's about building confidence and a sense of achievement. It's about having something in common with your peers. It's about independence.”



David Hopcroft at one of his Young Driver lessons with an instructor

Anna Hopcroft is the mum of 28-year old David, who has cerebral palsy, epilepsy and is registered blind, although he does have some sight. Anna commented: “When David's brother Mark started to drive, David let us know he wanted to learn too. We felt heartbroken as we knew he would never be able to drive on the

roads due to his problems. Then nine years ago I came across Young Driver. He first had a lesson at the NEC on the 14th Feb 2016 and absolutely loved it. From then on David has had at least eight one-hour lessons a year at Stoneleigh Park, which is a bigger venue, in an automatic car. We have never looked back. He is treated like royalty and the staff are amazing and cannot do enough for him or us. His instructor is excellent with him and makes it fun for David while he is learning to control the vehicle. I am so proud of him. It makes him feel like a normal young person and gives him a life experience we never thought would happen."

Double amputee Tony Hudgell, who was awarded a BEM in the 2024 New Year Honours' list, got behind the wheel with Young Driver aged just nine years old. Paula Hudgell, Tony's adoptive mother, commented: "Tony was nervous and excited before his lesson, but when he finished he had the biggest smile on his face! We couldn't believe how his confidence grew so quickly with the help of his instructor. I'm sure this is the start of a lifelong love of driving, it's been great to see, and we're so pleased he's been able to have this experience."

Steph Curtis, who runs the @stephstwogirls page on Instagram and has written the book 'PDA in the Family', has bought her autistic daughter Sasha, 16, for several Young Driver lessons. She said: "Taking driving lessons in an automatic car with Young Driver has given our autistic daughter a sense of independence and confidence behind the wheel. The safe off-site environments coupled with the instructors' patience and tailored approach have helped her feel more in control, making the experience both enjoyable and empowering."

Young Driver has delivered over 1.5 million lessons, with an emphasis on safer driving. Research has shown dramatically reduced accident rates among its past pupils, with only 3.3% of former students being involved in accidents in the first six months after passing their driving test, versus the national average of 20%*. For more information visit www.youngdriver.com.