

PFA Tips

What to Do During a Traffic Stop

EVERYONE feels anxiety when they see that police car light up behind them. You begin to wonder, “Am I in trouble?” “What did I do wrong?” It may be difficult to slow down your brain in that moment and think about what you need to do. Sometimes, you’ve done nothing wrong but you may have a headlight or taillight out on your vehicle and the officer is just trying to be helpful by letting you know. So it’s time to start thinking about what you should do **BEFORE** you get pulled over. The goal is to have a safe interaction during a traffic stop.

Pull over slowly

Once you see the police lights or hear the siren behind you, look to see if there is a safe space to pull over and indicate you are pulling over with your turn signal. Take your time, safety first! Your turn signal lets the officer know that you’ve seen them and that you are just looking for a safe place to pull over. It’s okay if this takes you a little bit of time. You don’t have to feel rushed. Then slowly pull over to a safe area. Examples of safe places might be the shoulder on the side of the road, along the curb of a road without a shoulder, a parking lot, or even someone’s driveway.

Pulling over in traffic

Sometimes it’s hard to find a place to pull over. You may not be able to immediately stop. If there is nowhere to pull over, you can stop in the traffic lane you are driving in, but only if necessary. Be aware of your surroundings and the traffic around you. You may need to pull onto a side street or a parking lot for safety purposes. You might have to pull over on the left side of the roadway (it’s not always going to be safe to pull onto the right side of the road depending on what lane you are in).

Once the officer approaches your car and introduces themselves, ask if where you’ve stopped is okay or if the officer recommends that you move to a different location. Listen carefully to what the officer tells you. It’s a good idea to repeat it back to the officer to make sure you’ve understood what you are supposed to do. It’s okay to ask questions if there’s anything you don’t understand or that you didn’t hear correctly because of traffic noise.

Roll down your window

Roll your window all the way down so that the officer may talk to you. Do not be surprised if the officer comes to the passenger side of the car. They might do this for their own safety from oncoming cars.

Keep your hands on the steering wheel

It is critical that you leave your hands in plain view on the steering wheel. A police officer could easily think you might be trying to reach for, or be holding a weapon if they cannot see your hands. Wait for them to ask for your ID or other documents before you look for your wallet or open the glove box.



Officers conduct traffic stops all the time. They are used to saying the same thing over and over again, so sometimes they speak quickly. If you have difficulty hearing or understanding what the officer said, simply politely ask them to repeat it.

Disclose if you have a disability

This step is your choice to do so. However, your disclosure is helpful for the officer to know. With that information they will be less likely to misinterpret some characteristics you may display for acts of noncompliance. For instance, if you have difficulty looking at someone’s eyes when you speak to them, an officer may mistakenly think that you are trying to hide that you have been drinking. Or if you have sensory issues, and they understand that, they might be more willing to turn off their front lights and sirens.

continued on page 2

What to Do During a Traffic Stop – cont.

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**Be polite**

Be polite to the officer and follow their instructions. If there's anything you don't understand, just politely ask for additional explanation. The officer will do the best they can to make sure you understand everything. Do not argue with the officer.

Provide documents when asked

In almost every case, the officer will ask you to present your driver's license, vehicle registration, and possibly certificate of car insurance. They will take your documents back to their car.

Wait in the car for the officer to return

The officer will return your documents when they are finished. Checking your information on the police computer can take several minutes. If the officer is going to issue you a warning or give you a ticket it can take even more time! It is important that you wait in your car patiently. Only get out of your car if the officer specifically asks you to. They will provide instruction for what to do next.

Stay parked until the officer tells you it is ok to leave

Once the officer has given you back your license, vehicle registration, and insurance card, it's okay to ask, "Can I leave now?" Once the officer tells you it's okay to go, put your turn signal on and very carefully check your mirrors or look to see if oncoming traffic is approaching. Cars can approach very fast so be careful re-entering the roadway. You can even ask the officer before they walk back to their car if they can help you re-enter traffic. The officer may pause traffic for you so you can safely re-enter the roadway.

Additional Resources

PFA Tips: How to Interact with Police

<https://pathfindersforautism.org/articles/safety/parent-tips-how-to-interact-with-police/>

PFA Autism Disclosure Cards and Other Safety Resources

<https://pathfindersforautism.org/resources/safety/>

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