

# Navigating Autistic Perspectives and Leveraging Special Interests for Everyday Enrichment

Information and Strategies for Parents and Caregivers of Autistic Children

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Fishing, hockey, knitting, bingo, Lego, exercise...most people have specific hobbies or interests. For Autistic people, their interests are often more intense than others. They may also be different than those of neurotypical people, such as toilet brushes or ovens, or be based on learning an incredible amount of information on a specific, such as insects or World War 2 (Jordan and Harris, 2012). These are known as **special interests**.

Special interests can be challenging for parents. It can feel like their child focusing on one interest gets in the way of other important activities of daily living. But there is another way to think about special interests: as a strength to tap into to connect into self-care, school, having fun, and making friends.

## How do special interests help Autistic people?

Special interests can provide a sense of structure, familiarity, or competence, not to mention happiness (National Autistic Society, 2024). The world can feel like an unpredictable or overwhelming place for an Autistic child or adult. It can be reassuring for them to take an interest in something and understand everything there is to know about it or repeat the same action or information to get that sense of the familiar. Similarly, doing the same thing repeatedly can help an Autistic child or person feel like they are very good at doing something when other activities feel difficult and frustrating.

Special interests may also help a child connect with other people. They may not fully understand how others feel or the rules for social interaction; however, they can practice talking about their favourite interest, not to mention other people talking about it and engaging in it, until they feel comfortable sharing that interest with others.

## How can special interests support participation in everyday life?

Instead of discouraging special interests, with a bit of creativity, it is possible to incorporate them in ways that expand a child's engagement in everyday tasks. Some examples from my own occupational therapy practice include:

- Making a list of Star Wars characters, from good to bad and in between, and using them to understand helpful and unhelpful behaviours.
- Putting taste and texture words on Legos—for example, salty, crunchy, sweet, sour—and stacking them to describe new foods for a child with sensory sensitivity to food.
- Playing Dungeons & Dragons to develop social skills, including turn-taking and perspective-taking.
- Making a bingo card with the names of insects to practice spelling and handwriting.

There are many examples of famous Autistic people who have leveraged their special interests into their career: for example, artist Steven Wiltshire used art to help him communicate and eventually pursue architecture studies (Uplifting Voices, 2024).



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## Managing difficult situations

Keep in mind that special interests can sometimes be a bit overwhelming for your child and require structure and boundaries; like any other activity, balance is key. Here are some suggestions:

- Consider incorporating breaks in between discussion or engagement in the special interest.
- Communicate the structure and boundaries in advance of engaging in the activity.
  - How long will we be talking about the special interest before it is time to do something else?
  - What are the steps involved and when are the steps complete?
  - Is the person I am speaking to interested in the conversation? When is it time for others to take a turn in the conversation?

To sum it up, special interests are an opportunity to connect and bond with your child and help them connect to the greater world. All it takes is a bit of interest, imagination, and innovation!

## References

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