

Special Interests

Naomi Hazlett, BSc., MScOT, erg. for Autism Ontario

What are special interests?

A focus on specific topics pursued intensely. For example: insects, Star Wars, ovens, or swimming. (Jordan and Harris, 2012)

Interests	Special Interests
Are typically shared by others, such as horses, Legos, or Roblox.	May be unique to your child, such as ovens, light switches, or factories.
A child will engage in learning information about their interest among other activities in the day.	A child will try to learn everything there is to know about their interest for hours at a time.
A child will have several interests that come and go over the course of their life.	A child may focus on the special interest and nothing else. The interest may be the same or change over time.

(National Autistic Society, 2024)

How can special interests help an autistic person?

Structure:

Special interests can help a child immerse themselves in a structured set of rules that they can learn, whereas it can be hard to learn rules for the world around them, which are sometimes flexible or changing.

Familiarity:

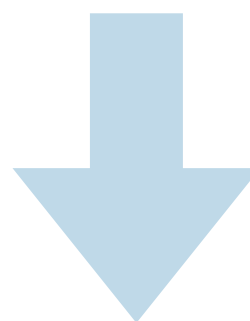
Engaging in the interest over and over, in the same way, can be comforting.

Competence:

A child can practice a special interest intensely until they feel confident in themselves.

Happiness and Satisfaction:

Special interests bring meaning to the lives of autistic people.



(National Autistic Society, 2024)

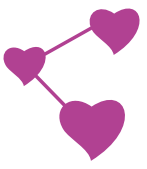
References

- Jordan, C. J., & Caldwell-Harris, C. L. (2012). Understanding differences in neurotypical and autism spectrum special interests through internet forums. *Intellectual and developmental disabilities*, 50(5), 391-402.
- National Autistic Society. (2024). Obsessions and repetitive behaviour - a guide for all audiences. <https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/behaviour/obsessions/all-audiences>

Special Interests

Naomi Hazlett, BSc., MScOT, erg. for Autism Ontario

How can parents help their child leverage their special interests?



Connect special interests to activities of daily living. Buy Star Wars clothing or a toothbrush, count insects on the way to the school bus, or play Dungeons & Dragons to develop social skills.



Learn your child's special interest alongside them and use it as a means of connection and bonding.



Help peers understand how to engage in your child's special interest as a means of making friends.

Managing challenging aspects of special interests

Challenge	Suggestion
Unable to Stop the Activity Independently	<p>Provide structure and boundaries prior to initiating the activity.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boundaries can include the time spent on the activity. • Structure could include a series of steps to follow through, then complete the activity.
Impacting Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Find ways to incorporate the special interest into learning as much as possible. • Incorporate engaging in the special interest as a break activity after engaging in other tasks. • Consider how the skills a child is learning through their special interest (fine motor skills, studying skills, etc.) could be connected to other work or school activities in the future.
Limiting Social Opportunities	<p>Try to find social opportunities for a child to engage with their special interest, such as an after-school insect club.</p> <p>Ask yourself:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Without this special interest, would there be other barriers to socialization? • Can we facilitate other children sharing the same special interest with the child?
Providing a Disruption to Other People	<p>See the above strategies.</p> <p>Practice compassion and remember that your child is sharing this interest with you because it is important to them!</p>

