

# Disclaimers & Statements

## General Disclaimer

- Opinions are of the presenters
- Make informed decisions

## Language

- Identity-first (e.g., Autistic person)
- Person-first (e.g., person with autism)
- Research terms

## Professional Disclaimer

- Specific questions
- Additional Resources

# **The Power of Passion: Navigating Autistic Perspectives and Leveraging Special Interests for Everyday Enrichment**

Naomi Hazlett, BSc., MScOT, erg.

Featuring Alex Breton

*February 15<sup>th</sup>, 2024*



**Autism**ONTARIO

# Alex Breton

- Lived Experience Panelist
- Self-Advocate
- Co-Game Master, Dungeons & Dragons Program





# Naomi Hazlett, BSc., MScOT, erg.

- Registered occupational therapist with the l'Ordre des ergothérapeutes du Québec.
- Douglas Mental Health University Institute
- Teaches at Concordia University, University of Toronto, and Centennial College
- Private practice.
- Bachelor of Science in Cognitive Science and Psychology and Masters of Occupational Therapy at the University of Toronto.
- Lived experience includes neurodiversity, mental illness, and chronic pain.



# Agenda

- What are special interests?
- How special interests can support participation
- Alex's story
- Q&A

# Other words for special interests

- Circumscribed interests (Turner-Brown et al., 2011)
- Specialized interests

# What are special interests?

**A focus on specific topics pursued with intensity**

- **Uncommon:** toilet brushes, ovens
- **Specific topics:** insects, Star Wars, World War 2
- **Common interests pursued with intensity:** Swimming, horses, trains

• (Jordan and Harris, 2012)\*

\*Terminology changed from original study to promote inclusivity and acceptance.



# Special interests can...

- Stay the same or change over time
- Be an object or a topic
- Provide a sense of structure, familiarity, or competence
- Bring Autistic people happiness and satisfaction

(National Autistic Society, 2024)



# Faces of special interests



**Satoshi Tajiri**

Insects → Pokémon



**Steven Wiltshire**

Drawing → Architecture



**Hannah Gatsby**

Communication → Comedy

# Satoshi Tajiri

“Every time I found a new insect, it was mysterious to me...**Tiny discoveries like that made me excited...**When I was making games, something clicked, and I decided to make a game with that concept. **Everything I did as a kid is kind of rolled into one--that's what Pokémon is.**”

-(Pokedream, n.d.)





# Steven Wiltshire

“Art was not an option for me, it was my only form of communication until I was able to speak at the age of five. I have no understanding of Autism, I only understand that I love to draw and that **the more I study my passion of drawing the more I understand architecture.**”

-(Uplifting Voices, 2024)



# Hannah Gatsby

“On stage in interviews, the boundaries **and the rules of engagement are very clear**...I've spent my whole life really trying to **study the room — that is one of my one of my special subjects.**”

-(NPR, 2020)



Special interests can connect into, and support, work, school, and play for Autistic people.



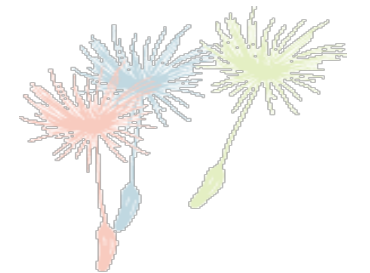
# ALEX'S STORY

# How can we leverage special interests?

- Connect special interests to activities of daily living.
- For example:
  - Creating your own toilet brush as a craft helps develop fine motor skills for dressing.
  - Learning how the word toilet brush is spelled helps develop writing.
  - Reading about toilet brushes develops literacy skills.
- Audience examples

When to take a different approach...

# **CHALLENGES AND SUGGESTIONS**



## Challenge

I. Unable to stop the activity/  
interest independently

## Suggestion

- Prior to initiating the activity, provide structure and boundaries.
  - **Boundaries** can include the time spent on the activity.
  - **Structure** could include a series of steps to follow through, then complete the activity.

## Challenge

### 2. Impacting on learning

## Suggestion

- 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.



## Challenge

### 3. Limiting social opportunities

## Suggestion

- Try to find social opportunities for a child to engage with their special interest, such as an after-school insect club.
- Ask yourself:
  - Without this special interest, would there be other barriers to socialization?
  - Can we facilitate other children sharing the same special interest with the child?

## Challenge

4. Providing a disruption to other people

## Suggestion

- See the previous slides.
- Practice compassion and remember that your child is sharing this interest with you because **it is important to them!**

# Final thoughts

1. Special interests are **a way to connect with your child.**
2. Special interests are **highly motivating and meaningful** for Autistic people.
3. Special interests **can be connected to activities of daily living to support development and well-being.**
4. **Boundaries and structure can help manage** the more challenging aspects of navigating special interests.

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<b>Challenge</b>	<b>Suggestions</b>
Unable to stop the activity/interest independently	Provide structure and boundaries prior to initiating the activity. Boundaries can include the time spent on the activity. Structure could include a series of steps to follow through, then complete the activity.
Impacting on learning	Find ways to incorporate the special interest into learning as much as possible; engagement in the special interest could then be incorporated as a break activity to complete after engaging in other tasks.
Limiting social opportunities	Ask yourself: 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	Practice compassion and remember that your child is sharing this interest with you because it is important to them! See the above strategies.

# Thank You for Attending

“ “ No family or person on the spectrum in Ontario should ever feel alone, experience autism as a barrier to inclusion, or be without meaningful resources and opportunities. ” ”

MARG SPOELSTRA  
Executive Director, Autism Ontario