



Sabrina Gennari (picture) 2017

Autism How To... Work with Special Interests

An article about the things that people (incorrectly) call obsessions

Some people get really interested in one thing. Some people get really interested in lots of things. Some interests can last for decades. Some come and go but are always THE most important thing in the world at that time! In the world of autism we call these 'special interests' (SIs).

One thing for sure, when it comes to folks with autism and their interest in pylons, fluff, trains, weather systems, the Treaties of Versailles, it isn't something that they do - it is someone that they are. It's not 'bolted on' - it's more fundamental than that. When we know this, and believe it, we also know that dismissing SIs or denying access to them is not the way to go.

Approaches that work with SIs and around them seem about right. Use a person's special interests to:-

- Start a conversation
- Make yourself interesting to the person with autism
- Build a connection/develop something in common
- Show the person you value them
- Start learning about something else (through the special interest)
- Show the person that EVERYTHING they do will get a response from you

By putting 'bookends' either side of the activity we keep it accessible, secure and in place.

With special interests it's a question of giving them a home. Create a time and a place for their expression. When thinking about a positive programme of activities/events/tasks/work/learning it is vital to build in 'structured' access to SIs. In this context 'structured' means a clear beginning, middle and end, and a place within a whole programme of similarly structured activities. It's like putting up a shelf, placing the SIs on it and popping bookends either side.

By putting 'bookends' either side of the activity we keep it accessible, secure and in place. We can also (over the right period of time) put a little squeeze on those bookends to help make sure that SIs are not placing unwanted restriction on learning and experience.

Remember :

SIs can be a springboard to development and learning

They are where we will start but they are not where we will end up

Special care needs to be taken with SIs when they are risky

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