

PositivelyAutism.com Newsletter

January 2013

Topic: Teaching with Special Interests



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Jan./Feb. Newsletter Topic: Teaching With Special Interests

Children and adults with autism may have strong interests in a certain area, such as computers, weather, trains, etc. These interests can often be used as powerful teaching tools to increase academic skills, improve behaviors, and facilitate social skills.

In this month's newsletter, we will provide information and resources about how to use special interests to make learning more fun, motivating, and effective.

This month's issue is dedicated to [Dylan Hockley](#), a six-year-old boy with autism who was one of the children lost at Sandy Hook Elementary School. Here is a quote from an article about Dylan:

"In front of the packed church here, Ian and Nicole Hockley, the parents of Dylan and Jake, offered a message of hope.

Like other children on the autism spectrum, Dylan, whom they called, "D," liked to flap his arms. When his mother asked him one day why he flapped his arms, she said, she was amazed when, despite his language struggles, he responded: 'Because I am a beautiful butterfly.'

Ms. Hockley noted the oft-repeated saying that the fluttering of a butterfly's wings could create a hurricane half a world away. 'Imagine,' she said, 'what 26 can do.'"

Special Interests: An Evidence-Based Practice?

As professionals or parents teaching children with autism, it is critical that the strategies we use are supported by research. This is important so that we don't waste money or the child's time on interventions that may not be effective. If an intervention method has sufficient research support, it is called an evidence-based practice (EBP).

The [National Standards Report](#) is a report published in 2009 that lists how much research support different autism intervention methods have. This report lists "incorporating...special interests...or ritualistic/obsessional activities into tasks" as an "Established" intervention*. This means that there is research to support the strategy.

I hope knowing that there is research support to incorporating student interests into learning activities will encourage more teachers to use this valuable strategy with confidence.

This month, Positively Autism will provide you with information and tools to use student interests to teach in the classroom and home.

**As part of the "Antecedent Package" - NAC Report, page 44.*

“Thank You, Bob Barker!” Using Passions, Strengths, and Areas of Special Interest to Support Students on the Spectrum

This article is from the [website of Dr. Paula Kluth](#). It, along with many others on inclusive schooling, differentiated instruction, and literacy can be found at www.PaulaKluth.com. Visit now to read her Tip of the Day, read dozens of free articles, and learn more about supporting diverse learners in K-12 classrooms.

Adapted from: Kluth, P. & Schwarz, P. (2008). [Just Give Him the Whale](#). Baltimore: Brookes.

Walker, a middle-school student I know, adores Bob Barker. He loves to watch The Price is Right, play games involving estimation, and often uses a “game show voice” when he speaks. Some teachers in his past have been less than enthusiastic about these quirks. One even gave Walker a red “x” on his behavior chart if he was caught talking “like Bob”. When Walker entered fifth grade, however, the teacher understood the interest in Bob Barker as a potential tool for teaching and supporting her student. She brought an inflatable microphone into the classroom so Walker could use it for his oral reports and class presentations, she kept a box of clip-on ties that he could wear on days he felt a bit “off” or down, and even incorporated several Price is Right games into her math instruction. When I asked this savvy educator about her decision to use Walker’s interests she was very clear about her rationale: I use Price is Right because it makes my job easier and really engages Walker. Why wouldn’t I use it? When things get particularly tough with him, we can often use Bob to get him back on track. So I don’t mind bringing in this obsession at all. In fact, I often think to myself, “Thank you, Bob Barker! What would I do without you?”

Like Walker, many individuals with autism and Asperger’s syndrome have deep interest in one or a variety of topics and, like Walker’s teacher, many educators are discovering that student fascinations can be bridges to learning, motivation, and support. Unfortunately, special interests are not always valued or seen as potential tools by teachers. Many a meeting has been planned and a behavior program written to squelch a student’s “obsessions.” In some of these instances, the student may not even be aware that the decision to limit or eliminate the fascination has been made. This individual may, therefore,

be confused or distressed when he or she realizes their favorite object or topic has been banned or significantly restricted.

Lianne Holliday Willey (2001), author, parent of a daughter with Asperger's syndrome and an "Aspie" herself cautions that it can be dangerous for people without autism to pass judgment about the passions and "favorites" of others. In fact, she shares, in many circles, having intense interests is considered positive and even admirable: At the base, I have to wonder, are we so very different from marathon athletes, corporate presidents, bird watchers, or new parents counting every breath their newborn takes? It seems lots of people, NT or otherwise, have an obsession of sorts. In my mind, that reality rests as a good one, for obsessions, in and out of themselves are not bad habits. There is much good about them. Obsessions take focus and tenacious study. They are the stuff greatness needs. I have to believe the best of the remarkable – the artists, musicians, philosophers, scientists, writers, researchers and athletes—had to obsess on their chosen fields or they would never have become great. (p. 122) I agree with Holiday Willey and feel strongly that if educators could reframe obsessions as fascinations, passions, interests, or favorites and see them as potential tools, educators and their students may potentially be more satisfied, calm, and successful. Five different ways that teachers can capitalize on a student's "loves" are shared here.

1) To Develop a Relationship with the Learner

One of the most common ways to get to know another person is to exchange information about interests. Whether you are a scuba diver or a cat lover, chances are you look for opportunities to tell others about your area of specialty. Some of us even go so far as to "advertise" our (sometimes very unique) interests via t-shirts, bumper stickers, tote bags and coffee cups ("Baseball Isn't Everything, It's the Only Thing", "I Love Beagles", "Quilting Queen"). We share this information perhaps because we hope to start conversations with others about our favorite topics. Or maybe we are seeking those with similar fascinations. Or we may simply be asserting "This is who I am—this is something special about me."

Asking students about their "favorites" is a great getting-to-know-you strategy. Since many of our students with autism have fascinations that may be unusual and not shared by many other people –like our friend, Jack, who loves wrenches—they may be especially appreciative of those who will take some extra time to listen and learn.

A formal way to use student interests to develop a relationship is to interview a student (or his family, if the student does not have reliable communication) about his area of interest. For example, Kip, a student who loves tractors, was shocked when his teacher, Mr. Rye, invited him to lunch and proceeded to ask him all about John Deere, Case, and other companies that the student revered. This was a turning point in Kip's education as no teacher had ever treated his love of farm equipment as anything more than a tolerable quirk. While Kip was never reprimanded for talking about tractors, he was discouraged from doing so. As a result, he felt frustrated at school and routinely begged his mother to let him stay home. After being interviewed by Mr. Rye, however, he became excited to go to school and, his mother reported that he worked harder for Mr. Rye than he had for any other teacher. When Mr. Rye asked Kip to take risks or to challenge himself, the young man would take the charge seriously and work to impress his teacher. When asked the reason for his turn around, Kip replied, "I work well with Mr. Rye. We both love tractors. We understand each other."

2) To Help Them Shine

Students with autism labels may use their passion or fascination to showcase their talent and demonstrate to others that they are intelligent. This may be especially important for learners who have been seen or labeled as challenging or difficult. You might help your students create a resume, portfolio, or scrapbook so they can showcase special talents or areas of expertise in a formal way. Or consider planning a classroom-wide “tell us what you know” talent show that focuses on student’s areas of expertise. Students can choose to either give a short presentation on areas of special interest or simply stand before the group and field questions from fellow classmates.

3) To Expand Social Opportunities

Some students who find conversation and common ways of socializing a challenge are amazingly adept when the interaction occurs in relation to an activity or favorite interest. For instance, Patrick, an eighth-grader, had few friendships and seldom spoke to his classmates until a new student came into his English classroom wearing a Star Wars tee-shirt. Patrick’s face immediately lit up and he began bombarding the newcomer with questions and trivia about his favorite film. The new student, eager to make a friend, began bringing pieces of his science fiction memorabilia to class. Eventually, the two students struck up a friendship related to their common interest and, with teacher support, formed a lunch club where a few students gathered to play video and board games related to science fiction films (Kluth & Schwarz, 2008).

4) To Comfort

Teachers who understand the power of student passions as well as those who simply are concerned about making their students lives as stress-free as possible will explore how each learner’s fascinations and areas of interest might be used in times of crisis, stress, and difficulty. Too often, we face a student’s crisis with warnings and consequences. Instead, we should be providing access to a student’s fascinations when times get tough. Not only does this strategy serve to make the student’s day more relaxing but it can make the teacher’s day more calm and predictable as well!

For example, a fourth-grade teacher, aware that her student, Mary Chris, frequently had difficulty during fire and tornado drills (including screaming and biting herself), used that student’s passion to keep her focused and relaxed during these stressful times. When the alarm sounded, the teacher pulled Mary Chris to the front of the line and softly sang “Walking After Midnight” as the class marched to their designated emergency spot. With this sensitive support in place, Mary Chris quietly and quickly walked out of the building beside her teacher (Kluth & Schwarz, 2008).

Following this teacher’s lead, you might allow a student to spend time with favorite objects or materials during times of distress or difficulty. You might even provide a comfort space somewhere in the school where the learner can go to relax and “visit” favorite materials or activities.

5) To Interest Them in Standards-Based Content

In addition to tapping into a learner's knowledge base, teachers might also target a student's special skill areas. In a study I conducted with my colleague (Kasa-Hendrickson & Kluth, 2005), a teacher, Ms. Holder, who was planning for Shantel, a child with autism, used one of the young girl's areas of prowess to involve her in social studies curricula: I want her to realize that she is very good at doing some things on her own. So I asked myself, "What is Shantel good at on her own?" Puzzles. She is great at puzzles. I knew another teacher had this magnetic puzzle globe so I asked if I could borrow it. Shantel needs to learn about Europe. It is important for her to have the same academic experiences and I might as well incorporate what she is good at to do it. (p. 9) Not only was Ms. Holder able to find classroom time for Shantel to work on the puzzles she so loved, but she found creative ways to push her student into complex content using a skill that the learner prized. Any teacher can search the curriculum for opportunities to teach about the student's loves. If the student is crazy about vacuum cleaners, this topic can be quite easily featured in a unit on inventions. If the student adores whales, the teacher can discuss them during lessons on habitats or ocean life. And if the student is fascinated with Nancy Drew and mystery novels, this topic can not only be explored during reading or English classes in general, but also when the class studies deduction or problem-solving.

Certainly interests can be limiting and teachers may, at times, need to work with students to reduce time with and attention to fascinations. What has been less of a focus of conversation and planning in schools has been the idea that special interests can also be freeing, calming, motivating, captivating and inspiring. In this article, I hope I have communicated that the fascinations, interests, and areas of expertise that are so often important to students with autism (and other students, as well) should be more valued, honored, and respected and used more frequently as tools for teaching, supporting, and including.

References

Kasa-Hendrickson, C., & Kluth, P. (2005). "We have to start with inclusion and work it out as we go": Successful inclusion for non-verbal students with autism. *Journal of Whole Schooling*, 2, 2-14.

Kluth, P. & Schwarz, P. (2008). ["Just give him the whale!": 20 Ways to use fascinations, areas of expertise, and strengths to support students with autism.](#)

Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes. Willey, L.H. (2001). [Asperger syndrome in the family: Redefining normal.](#) Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley.

Video on Power Cards: Motivating Students with Autism Using Special Interests

http://youtu.be/_AOqTdinGBI

Using the Power Card Strategy to Teach Social Skills

Read a recent research study about using the Power Card strategy to increase social skills.

Title: Using the Power Card Strategy to Teach Social Skills to a Child with Autism

Authors: Vicky Spencer, Cynthia G. Simpson, Mindy Day, and Elizabeth Buster

Journal: TEACHING Exceptional Children Plus

Issue: Volume 5, Issue 1, September 2008

Link: [Click here to read the article.](#)

Book Review: "Just Give Him the Whale: 20 Ways to Use Fascinations, Areas of Expertise, and Strengths to Support Students with Autism"

Authors: Paula Kluth and Patrick Schwarz

Publisher (Date): Paul H Brookes Publishing (2008)

Recommended for: primarily teachers, but could also be helpful for parents and caregivers.

Summary: A collection of twenty tips, with examples, on how to use a student's interests in the classroom, school, and community.

Review: Paula Kluth and Patrick Schwartz have done it again! These authors have created another valuable, useful guide for teachers. "Just Give Him the Whale" provides information on what teachers can do to help students who have "deep, consuming fascinations" to increase communication, reduce anxiety, facilitate inclusion, and learn academic content.

It did leave me wanting more in-depth information about how the ideas presented could be expanded for general use in the classroom; but I think this book is a helpful guide and I would highly recommend it to every teacher of students with autism. I found that the ideas presented were very relevant and practical for both general education and special education teachers. I believe that if the ideas were used, it would help increase student motivation, reduce many challenging behaviors, and help create a positive, caring classroom community. According to "Just Give Him the Whale," all of this can be done in a way that is positive and respectful to students with autism.

[Buy the Book from Amazon.com](#) and Amazon will make a donation to Positively Autism.

Teaching Guide: Using Special Interests

A brief guide to using special interests for teaching, including steps and examples. These guides are published about a variety of teaching strategies and ABA methods. Great resources! <http://www.txautism.net/uploads/target/UsingSpecialInterests.pdf>

Train Themed Program for "Outsmarting Explosive Behavior"

[Outsmarting Explosive Behavior: A Visual System of Support and Intervention for Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders](#)

A "program is designed to help decrease - and in some cases eliminate - explosive behavior in children with autism spectrum disorders. Tantrums and meltdowns are among the greatest challenges presented by ASD, often leaving parents and educators searching for answers. Outsmarting Explosive Behavior is a visual program, laid out as a fold-out poster, that can be individualized for each user. Four train cars represent the four stages of explosive behavior: Starting Out, Picking up Steam, Point of No Return, and Explosion. By using visuals to appeal to children with ASD, this program makes it easy to help them identify their current state and take steps to decrease the chances of a meltdown."

- Description from the Autism Asperger Publishing website

Dinosaurs 24/7: Understanding The Special Interests of Children with Asperger's Syndrome

Here is a recently published research study about using special interests:

Title: "Dinosaurs 24/7: Understanding The Special Interests of Children with Asperger's Syndrome "

Author(s): Mary Ann Winter-Messiers and Cynthia M. Herr

Journal: Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis

Link: http://www.iancommunity.org/cs/about_asds/the_special_interests_of_children_with_aspergers

"The Drums Are His Therapy" - A Powerful Story of Using Special Interests to Make a Difference in a Child's Life

A powerful story of how finding a child's special interest and passion made a difference in his life. After discovering his love for drums, Ian, a child with autism made great progress. Here's a quote from the article.

"Ian began to flourish. Ian's coordination improved. He was no longer bumping into things. He could color inside the lines. He began talking without being prompted. He became focused. He gained self confidence. Ian stopped running from his parents. His violent episodes

dissipated. His IQ jumped from 76 to 130. He earned awards, musical and academic. And two years ago, Ian learned he no longer needed occupational and physical therapy. The drums are his therapy."

Read the entire article here: <http://www.spokesman.com/stories/2013/jan/02/drums-hit-autistic-washington-boy/>

New Free Downloads: "Travis the Train Learns Coins"

Sing these songs and show the pictures to help learn the names and values of coins with a fun and motivating train theme!

Penny: http://www.positivelyautism.com/downloads/Coins_TrainStory_Penny.pdf

Nickel: http://www.positivelyautism.com/downloads/Coins_TrainStory_Nickel.pdf

Dime: http://www.positivelyautism.com/downloads/Coins_TrainStory_Dime.pdf

Quarter: http://www.positivelyautism.com/downloads/Coins_TrainStory_Quarter.pdf

All Coins: http://www.positivelyautism.com/downloads/Coins_TrainStory_All.pdf

January Positive Autism News

Artist Educates Others on Autism

January 24, 2013

http://www.waynecojournalbanner.com/news/education/article_29c65b94-66a3-11e2-9198-001a4bcf6878.html

Student to Sing at Gala for Autism

January 22, 2013

<http://www.communitynewscorp.com/main.asp?SectionID=1&SubSectionID=94&ArticleID=8706>

'Prominent' Win for Student with Autism

January 21, 2013

<http://fox4kc.com/2013/01/21/prominent-win-for-student-with-autism/>

Boy With Autism Inspires Others

January 17, 2013

http://rochesterhomepage.net/fulltext?nxd_id=365552

Alexis Wineman, Miss Montana, Is Miss America Pageant's First Contestant With Autism

January 10, 2013

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/01/10/alexis-wineman-miss-america-montana-autistic_n_2448848.html

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