

## **www.autismhelp.info**

### **Obsessive topics**

#### **Points to note**

- The child with autism may have a narrow range of interests. Sometimes this will be one obsessive interest that excludes all other topics. He may have an encyclopaedic knowledge of his obsession.
- Obsessions can take a number of forms. They can be;
  - self-stimulatory behaviours (auditory, visual, tactile, motor)
  - attachment to objects (trains, cars)
  - interest in one topic to the exclusion of all others
  - verbal obsessions (facts, dates, statistics, car number plates)
  - insistence on sameness and resistance to change (lining up objects)Obsessions may change or alter with time but are likely to be part of the child's life forever. They provide the child with pleasure and satisfaction. The child feels safe talking about his obsession because he knows what to say and how to answer questions on the subject.
- It is common for the child to talk about his preferred interest without any regard to the listener's interest in the conversation.
- The child may be keen to engage in conversation, but the only way he knows how is by talking about his obsession. He lacks the pragmatic language skills to just have 'a chat'.
- Talking about a favourite topic can be a way of reducing anxiety as this helps to control the child's environment and increases predictability.
- Obsessive interests can intrude on the child's thoughts, leading to distractibility and poor concentration.
- The child may have little motivation to work on topics that fall outside his preferred area of interest.

#### **What you can do**

- Try to understand the child's reasons for continually going on about his obsessive topic - then try to limit the extent to which it intrudes on his thoughts and conversations.
- Identify certain times that the child may talk about his obsessive topic, (for example only in the morning.) Gradually reduce the length and frequency of these times. Use visual sequencing to help with this (ie. timetable).
- Help the child recognise the signs that a listener is growing tired of the conversation, ie. yawning, looking away, lack of positive verbal response. Suggest a change of topic when these signs are observed.
- Try not to get caught up in obsessive talk or questioning. If the obsessive talk is a way for the child to reduce his anxiety, look at ways of reducing stress and help him to find other ways of coping with that stress. See [Interrupting, repetitive questions and talking too much](#) for more hints on handling obsessive talk.

- Show interest and give lots of praise when the child talks about something other than his obsessive interest.
- If the child's interest is limited to one particular topic, such as diesel engines, try to expand his interest into other areas such as different types of transport and machines. Incorporate the interest into other areas. If the obsession is with animals, the student could learn about the countries in which they would be found.
- One of the most effective ways of managing the obsessive interest is to use it as a reward. It is very motivating for a child to be allowed to engage in his obsession without interruption for a certain amount of time each day. You could reward him for completing his work with free time in the library to read about his obsessive interest.
- Utilise the child's expertise in his preferred topic (provided the interest is socially appropriate) by asking him to share his knowledge with the rest of the class. Common obsessions include trains, dinosaurs, maps, capital cities, weather patterns and statistics. These topics can be incorporated into many areas of the curriculum.