

Supporting Our Autistic Scholars



Special Interests

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Definition

“Special interests” are intense or highly-focused ideas, activities, characters, or attachments commonly associated with Autistic individuals. Specialist interests are often referred to in a negative light and referred to as “obsessions” or “fixations”. However many Autistic adults feel their interests are essential to their sense of well-being and daily structure.

Interests

Having special interests is part of the human experience. Neurotypical (non-Autistic) scholars also have special interests like hobbies or sports. However these interests are often more socially-oriented or more related to mainstream topics.



Satiety in Learning

One important difference in Autistic special interest is the drive to understand all aspects of a topic. Rather than just enjoying a show about trains, Autistic individuals often seek out full knowledge of the interest - how different models of trains operate, how trains impact local transportation, or which trains are the latest models. Brain studies show that the “salience network”, which helps direct our attention to task, is more activated in the brains of Autistic individuals engaged in their special interest as compared to peers exposed to the same topic.



Impact on Learning

Studies of teacher’s use of special interests in the classroom demonstrate improvements in educational attainment. Instead of viewing the interest as restrictive, challenge yourself to include their interests in the school environment to help your scholar engage in the curriculum.



Classroom Strategies

Try to incorporate special interests into your whole class plan. If your Autistic scholar enjoys inventions, let them choose an inventor for their Black History assignment. When possible, allow your scholar to complete alternative assignments that includes their favorite topic. For example, use word problems with their favorite sports team. Using reward systems featuring special interests can also improve academic engagement during more challenging tasks.

How can we build academic skills through special interests?

References

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