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Working with Restricted and Repetitive Interests

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For education and sharing purposes

Restrictive and repetitive interests and intense focus are diagnostic to autism spectrum disorders. These interests are sometimes characteristic of people with other special needs.

Children and adults with autism spectrum disorders may have difficulty sustaining attention to useful topics. We can engage their focus and attention in more topics if we make the restricted, repetitive interest an element of those topics, rather than constantly trying to “make them stop focusing on it.”

Do not describe restrictive, repetitive, focused interests as obsessions, perseverations, or compulsions.

Use this language to describe restricted, repetitive, focused interests:

Intensely focused on...

Really interested in...

Likes...

Enjoys...

Knows a lot about...

Wants to talk about...

Likes to talk about...

Fascinated by...

Prefers...

Is focused on...

Questions to ask about restricted repetitive interests:

Is the interest dangerous? If yes, discourage and redirect to other, related activities that share similar, safer components.

Is the interest potentially dangerous? If yes, begin to reshape the interest in such a way that it becomes less potentially dangerous.

Is it stigmatizing*? If yes, discourage and redirect to other related, activities that share similar, less stigmatizing components.

(*Define a stigmatizing behavior as one that causes others not to want the individual to be allowed to be present.)

Considerations in working with and expanding restricted interests:

If the restricted, repetitive interest is not dangerous and not stigmatizing, consider the following:

- Are there any people who have similar interests in our society or elsewhere in the world?
- Are there any books, magazines, websites, or other materials about this interest?
- Are there any clubs, groups, or organizations that share this interest?
- Are there any other children or adults who share this interest?
- Is there anywhere in daily life where this interest could be utilized?
- Is there a specialized environment in which this interest would appear more typical?
- Is there a related interest that is more typical to which the individual could be guided?
- Is there a way to make this interest a positive and note-worthy quality for the individual to display?
- Is there a profession or job that includes aspects of this interest?
- Could this interest be turned into a hobby, collection, or display?
- Is there a way to *gradually* shape this interest to make it more acceptable or more like the interests of others?
- Can the interest be *gradually* expanded to make it more productive?

Practical ideas for maximizing restricted interests:

- Schedule opportunities in the visual schedule of the individual to engage in the interest. Reinforce the individual for engaging in the interest at that time.
- Use visual and/or auditory timers to let the individual know how long s/he may engage in the interest.
- Keep a note card with the individual. If the individual begins to discuss or engage in the restricted interest at the wrong time, write on the card the time and place where the individual will be able to discuss or engage in the interest. Show the card to the individual. Follow through.
- Use the interest to show others that the individual is smart and well informed.
- Use the interest to teach the individual to begin or sustain conversation with another person.
- Use the interest for an opportunity to engage a peer in an interest-related activity.
- Allow the individual to teach or tutor others in the area of interest.
- Make the interest a part of other unrelated activities such as writing about the interest in language arts, using the interest in artwork, or using the interest in mathematical word problems.
- Use the interest to teach new concepts and skills. For example, if the interest is roller coasters, use it to teach about size, weight, velocity, safety, social skills while waiting in line to have a ride, and money skills.
- Use the interest as a break, free time, or relaxation time.
- Describe the interest in the most positive terms possible.
- Help the individual expand the interest by exposing the individual to related topics, activities, and materials.
- Start a club and find others who share the interest.
- Write letters, visit libraries, or museums, view websites, or send for materials about the interest.