

Identify and work with the person's natural interests and passions!

Get to know this Youth Advocate Programs

- KEY TO SUCCESS
- PROGRAM QUALITY INDICATOR

What does this mean?

Children and adults on the autism spectrum have strong natural interests, just as we all do. Research shows that acknowledging, sharing, and working with passionate interests brings great dividends: the person becomes more self-motivated and socially connected, and less dependent on prompts and artificial rewards.

What is the challenge? Because of the communication challenges of autism, passionate natural interests may be overlooked. Because of the sensorimotor differences of autism, those interests may be judged “odd” and actively discouraged.

What is the expectation? Youth Advocates expects that all staff will identify (in the treatment plan) and actively support (through multiple settings and objectives, on an ongoing basis) the intense natural interests of its clients on the autism spectrum as an evidence-based approach to fostering their self-actualization and self-determination.

How and Why? Keep in mind these 3 do's and don'ts

1. DO identify the child or adult's passionate natural interests by observing such areas of expertise as: informational (topics on which the person has amassed great amounts of knowledge), educational (preferred school subjects, books, etc.), musical, technological, hobbies, sports, games and preferred play, favorite stories, and favorite types of community places and activities.

Because: People with autism are often misunderstood and misperceived as lacking intellect and interest in the world around them. Their genuine enthusiasms may be considered perseverations when in fact they should be honored as important gateways to learning and to the formation of relationships. Sometimes a support person or caregiver needs to be a detective to discover deep personal interests that are not obvious to others, and sometimes he or she needs to be an advocate for the right of the person with autism to pursue their passionate interests.

DON'T mistake soothing or calming activities (e.g. rocking, spinning, flapping, shredding paper) for passionate natural interests.

Because: People with autism have preferred ways of regulating their nervous systems, as we all do. Sensorimotor regulation is a personal health need that must be understood and supported, but is not generally an intellectual interest that lends itself to shared exploration, socialization, and deeper connection with other aspects of the world.

2. DO engage with the person on the autism spectrum to enjoy, explore, and broaden his or her passionate interests. Create a two-way street on which you learn with and from the person, encouraging them to take the roles of teacher and leader.

Because: Human development takes place through reciprocal relationships, and reciprocal relationships can only form through knowing and sharing mutual interests. Respectful engagement around a passionate interest not only models and shapes the process of active learning, it also builds a solid foundation for meeting the fundamental developmental needs of intimacy, safety, and trust.

DON'T take away access to passionate interests in order to use them as rewards for controlling behavior.

Because: To be effective, a support relationship must be proactive and positive (based on two-way sharing) rather than reactive and negative (based on one-way responses of “no” and “don't”). Deep personal interests are for mutual exploration and growth, not for use in gaining power over others. A person who finds that their personal enthusiasms are being used to manipulate or control them tends to feel betrayed, lose trust, and shut down communication to avoid exposing any more personal information. Such a person may turn against a subject or activity he or she previously loved, resulting in less engagement with the world and with others.

3. DO maximize access to passionate interests to make everyday tasks and activities more meaningful and motivating.

Because: Incorporating deep interests (e.g. maps, trains, dinosaurs, Harry Potter) into such everyday activities as math problems, book reports, vocabulary enrichment, art and music, conversations, hobbies and collecting, clothing and décor, recreation, travel, etc. helps the person with autism to make sense of their world and become self-motivating rather than reward-dependent or prompt-dependent. The more a person “learns how to learn” in response to a passionate interest, the more he or she will learn to think independently and problem-solve flexibly.

DON'T deny access to passionate natural interests as a form of punishment.

Because: If natural interests are being incorporated appropriately into a person's day, they will be so deeply woven into the fabric of all activities that this will not even be possible. In fact, taking passionate interests away would deprive a staff person or caregiver of one of their most useful means of supporting a person with autism to communicate what when wrong and resolve the problem. For example, a Social Story incorporating a person's interests can help them process how and why a bad situation occurred, and what to do differently next time. Through art or music, a deep personal interest can become the basis for exploring the feelings and perceptions that resulted in a loss of control. Helping the child or adult into the familiar territory of a shared interest can be calming and help them regain a sense of safety. When people are stressed, upset, or having a bad day, depriving them of the very things that give meaning to their life is especially destabilizing, and deprives both the person and their supporters of the very tools they need to figure out a solution.

How Can I Learn More? To enhance your knowledge of the fascinating subject of human motivation, learning, and relationships, here are some good places to start:

Fogel, Alan

1993 *Developing Through Relationships*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Gernsbacher, Morton Ann

2006 "Toward a Behavior of Reciprocity," accepted for publication in *Journal of Developmental Processes*. Retrieved from the web at http://psych.wisc.edu/lang/pdf/Gernsbacher_reciprocity.pdf

Greenspan, Stanley

1998 *The Child With Special Needs: Encouraging Intellectual and Emotional Growth*. NY: Perseus Press.

Koegel, Robert, Laura Schreffirnan, Amy Good, Laurie Cerniglia, Clodagh Murphy, and Lynn Kern Koegel

Undated *How to Teach Pivotal Behaviors to Children with Autism: A Training Manual*. University of Santa Barbara; available for ordering online <http://www.education.ucsb.edu/autism/behaviormanuals.htm>

Kohn, Alfie

1993 *Punished by Rewards*. NY: Houghton Mifflin Company.
