

spark*/spark*EL Backgrounder on

Using each child's special interests

Special interests are objects, topics and events that have value and personal meaning to the child. He has feelings about them that influence his engagement in learning and activities. Interests are relatively enduring over time. They're not just impulses of the moment (like, "Oh that caught my eye. How interesting!"). Developed interests are sometimes called hobbies, personal excursions, islands of expertise, or passions. In the field of autism, they're typically referred to as

restricted or circumscribed interests or obsessions.

Interests have both affective and cognitive components; that is, positive emotion and high concentration of attention as well as knowledge. There appears to be intrinsic value to the child which prompts the feelings and attention. Personal interests don't seem to arise from deliberate decision-making, like, "If I know about this, I'll get better grades." Objects, topics or events somehow trigger interest and pleasure in the child.

What kinds of things are special interests?

Objects, topics or events somehow trigger interest and pleasure in the person. In the field of autism, the top three interest areas include:

1. nature and properties of objects (like spinning objects, machines, vehicles, computers, astronomy, building, lights)
2. classifications (for example, collecting)

3. television, movies, and videos (like, cartoon or animé characters)

Three factors tend to contribute to the development of interest: knowledge, positive emotion, and personal value. As the child learns more about an area, he becomes more skilled and knowledgeable. With the increase in knowledge, he feels more competent and skilled and finds meaning and



spark*, *Self-regulation Program of Awareness and Resilience in Kids.*, is an innovative evidence-based program that teaches children how to manage and regulate their behavior, thinking and emotions. **spark*EL** is *spark** for Elementary-school-aged children.

Both programs are based on well-researched theory, current neurology, extensive clinical practice and **spark***-specific research.

spark* and **spark*EL** are comprehensive, practical and systematic and provides all information and resources needed to implement the program successfully.

Find out more at <http://spark-kids.ca>

What kinds of things (cont'd)

relevance in the activity. For children with autism, these same issues likely apply but the choice of interests may relate to the structure, order and predictability they offer. For example, wheels on vehicles spin in orderly ways, Lego™ form clear structures, and

Pokémon or Thomas the train can be classified by different features.

In the spark* and spark*EL resource files, you'll find the Child Background Information form. It'll help you gather information about each child's likes and dislikes.

How do I use special interests in spark*/spark*EL

Personal interests have value in teaching children, especially children who have difficulty focusing and/or sustaining their attention. **Interests always result in motivated behavior.** When using interests in teaching activities, children show deeper processing and better memory and rich, organized knowledge that they recall more readily. They tend to persist longer and put more effort into learning. The children also have greater feelings of competence when dealing with their special interests.

Because of these things, each child's special interests are a natural place to start teaching self-regulation. You'll more readily gain his attention and focus and have a motivated learner. He'll put more effort into activities that focus on his special interests and he'll persist with them. Also, the child is more likely to remember and recall the information you present.

This doesn't mean that you use

activities and themes solely related to the child's special interest. You can intersperse activities containing his special interests with others that have different content (just make sure the content doesn't relate to something he dislikes). You can use the special interest activity to entice him to complete another task—"When we're done this, I've got something special that you'll really like."

Don't worry about helping the child become totally entrenched in his special interest. Once you've worked with him for a while and he learns to trust you, you can move progressively away from focusing on his special interest. You can also use his special interests to work inhibitory control and resilience ("I won't let my brain get distracted by Pokémon even though I love them"). It also gives you ways to help the child develop his self-advocacy skills ("I can take that out of my brain right now").

How do special interests develop?

Interests typically develop through four phases.

- 1. The child's interest is triggered by an experience with an object, topic or event.*
- 2. He develops positive feelings about the area and begins to enrich his knowledge about it as well as a sense of its value to him. His attention is now more focused and longer in duration.*
- 3. The child begins to develop an enduring relationship with the topic and he needs little support to continue pursuing his interest.*
- 4. The interest becomes more long-term and the child begins to expand his knowledge and curiosity about it.*

Little is known about the development of interests in children with autism. It's likely that it follows the same four phases but there is little need for support from others to engage in the interests. Children with autism seem to just start focusing on an interest. This focus is marked by both intensity and duration, often to the exclusion of other things and of people.