

*“My mind was constantly whirring with thoughts, worries and concerns. The time spent with my intense interest was the only time in which I had a clear mind – it gave me that much sought-after relaxation.” Autistic young person*

Most autistic children and teenagers will have highly focused ‘Special Interests’ also known as Ruling Passions or Passionate Interests, which they can explore in huge detail for long periods of time and can be “their reason for getting out of bed in the morning”. Special interests are not exclusive to neurodivergent people. Neurotypical individuals may also experience them. Special interests offer joy and purpose and are different from obsessions and rituals or repetitive behaviours, which can sometimes link to debilitating distress and impact learning and limit social opportunities. Special interests often start from a young age and can change over time or be lifelong. Some common examples include music, history, animals, transport, maps, postcodes or numbers or astronomy, TV shows or games. Some young people might become attached to objects or unusual items such as stones. An interest in collecting is also quite common. They are more than hobbies and generate complete absorption into a topic or activity. Autistic children and teenagers enjoy their special interests and often feel proud of their knowledge. These interests can give meaning to their lives. These interests can be an important strength and a way to relieve stress. Schools can use the power of autistic special interests to help motivate and support learning rather than just offering them as a reward. Engaging in special interests can also support social interactions with peers. The theory of Monotropism suggests that pursuing our own interests is vital to autistic wellbeing. Monotropism is not all about special interests. It can be understood in terms of intense interests, but it covers areas in addition to the things the autistic person is passionate about. Autistic people often state that the pursuit of their special interest supports their happiness. As young adults many may channel their interest into study, paid work, volunteering and meaningful occupations.
Special interests can:
*- Provide structure, order and predictability and help children and young people manage the uncertainties of daily life.
- Motivate learning tasks.
- Give a way of starting conversations and developing friendships.
- Support self-regulation. Provide a feeling of stability and connection.
Further reading: National Autistic Society -Highly Focused Interests*[*What is autism*](https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/what-is-autism)

[*A personal perspective: How special interests can help autistic students thrive (autism.org.uk)*](https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/professional-practice/special-interests)

[*Obsessions and repetitive behaviour - a guide for all audiences (autism.org.uk)*](https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/behaviour/obsessions/all-audiences) *\**

**Special Interests / Ruling Passions**