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Obsessive topics

Points to note

- Children with autism tend to have a narrow range of interests. Sometimes this will be one obsessive interest that excludes all other topics.
- It is common for children with autism to talk about their preferred interest with out any regard to the listener's interest in the conversation.
- Some children with autism are keen to engage in conversation, but the only way they know how is by talking about their obsession. They lack the verbal skills to just have 'a chat'.
- Talking about a favourite topic can be a way of reducing anxiety as this helps to control the child's environment and increases predictability.
- Obsessive interests can intrude on the child's thoughts, leading to distractibility and poor concentration.
- Children with autism may have little motivation to work on topics that fall outside their preferred area of interest.

What you can do

- Try to understand the child's reasons for continually going on about his obsessive topic - then try to limit the extent to which it intrudes on his thoughts and conversations.
- Identify certain times that the child may talk about his obsessive topic, gradually reducing the length and frequency of these times.
- If the obsessive talk is a way for the child to reduce his anxiety, look at ways of reducing stress and help him to find other ways of coping with stress.
- Show interest and give lots of praise when the child talks about something other than his obsessive interest.
- If the child's interest is limited to one particular topic, such as Thomas the Tank Engine, try to expand his interest into other areas such as different types of trains or other types of transport.
- Use the obsessive interest to motivate the child. Tell him he can read or talk about his obsession after he has completed a task.
- Utilise the child's expertise in his preferred topic (provided the interest is socially appropriate) by asking him to share his knowledge with the rest of the class. Common obsessions include trains, dinosaurs, maps, capital cities and statistics. These topics can be incorporated into many areas of the curriculum.
- Help the child recognise the signs that a listener is growing tired of the conversation, ie. yawning, looking away, lack of positive verbal response. Suggest a change of topic when

these signs are observed.