



# THE LATEST RESEARCH ON AUTISM AND SPECIAL INTERESTS

This article is a review of the following research: Nowell, K. P., Bernardin, C. J., Brown, C., & Kanne, S. (2021). Characterization of Special Interests in Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Brief Review and Pilot Study Using the Special Interests Survey. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 51(8), 2711–2724

Research shows that between 65 percent and 88 percent of children with autism have at least one special interest.<sup>1,2</sup> Special interests go beyond typical hobbies or interests. They are interests that are abnormal in intensity or focus, and are often considered an obsession.<sup>3</sup> Special interests can involve a collection, such as cars or trains, or an intense focus on a narrow topic, such as on penguins or the Titanic.

Special interests are listed under “restricted and repetitive behaviors” in the DSM-5 and are included as one of the diagnostic criteria for autism spectrum disorder (ASD). In general, special interests fall under one of three categories:

**Circumscribed Interest** — an intense and restricted interest in objects or topics that often results in functional impairment.

**Unusual Preoccupation** — an intense interest in an object or topic that is unexpected for the child’s age or development.

**Atypical Attachment** — an intense attachment to specific or unusual objects.

While parents, caregivers and professionals have noted the positive and negative effects of special interests, research in this area is limited. Special interests have typically had a negative connotation as they are often inflexible and can be all-consuming. Recent studies, however, are now showing that the majority of autistic people feel empowered and calmed by their interest, not restricted. In fact, a 2017 study found that 62 percent of adults with autism said their interests had helped them succeed in life, and 86 percent reported that their employment or studies incorporate their special interest.<sup>4</sup>

A research team from the University of Missouri, led by Dr. Kerri P. Nowell, sought to learn more about special interests in the autism community. The team wanted to know what types of special interests are most common in children with autism, and what impact the special interests have on a child’s functioning. The team also sought to determine if types of special interests differ by age, how long most special interests last, and if there are differences in intensity and interference across special interests.

## 62%

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Study

The researchers developed and distributed the *Special Interest Survey* (SIS) to parents of 1,992 children with autism between the ages of two and 17 years old. The survey measured the following: the number of current special interests; the types of special interests and how unusual or unique each special interest was; how much the special interest interfered with daily functioning; and how long the special interest lasted.

Results

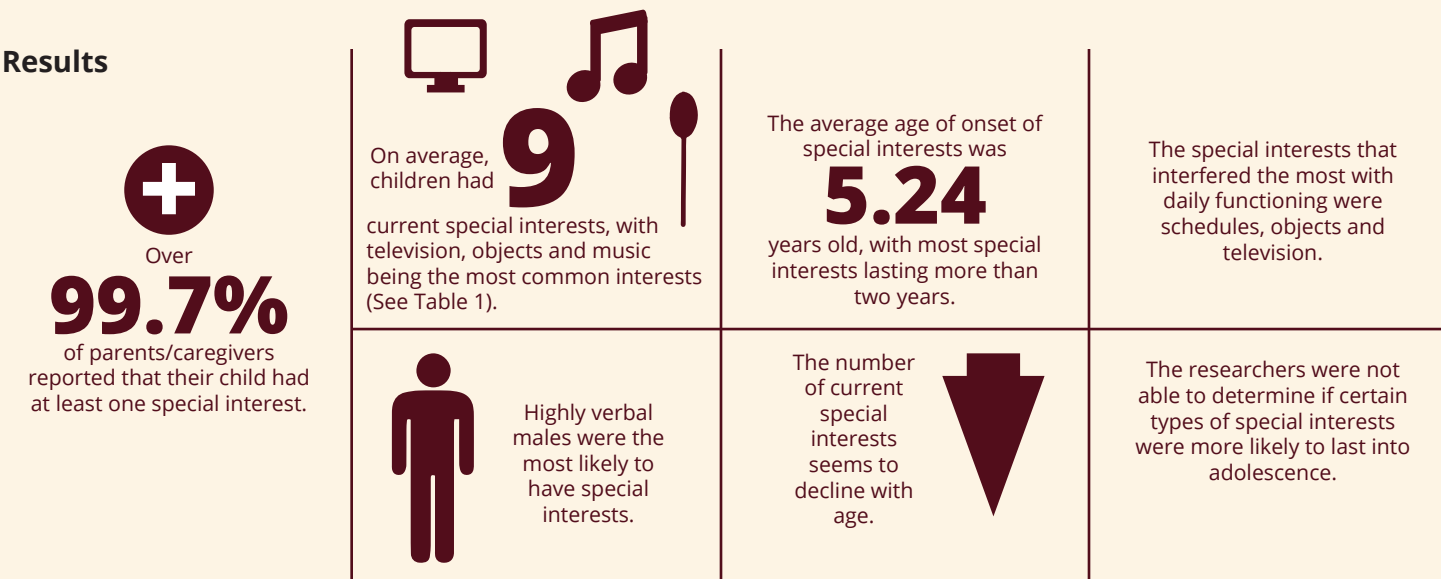


Table 1. The Top 10 Special Interest Categories<sup>5</sup>

Category	Percentage of children with this SI	Examples
Television	81.1	Videos on YouTube; watches the same movie over and over
Objects	72.3	Attached to certain things, such as balls, flashlights, spoons
Music	67. 1	Plays music all the time; knows the words to almost every song
Toys	58.8	Cars, Star Wars toys, My Little Pony
Collections	53.1	Pokémon cards, trains, rocks
Animals	50.2	Sharks, making animal sounds, dolphins
Construction	46.0	Building with LEGO
Transportation	45.3	Learns everything about cars; collects firetrucks
Art	43.0	Loves to draw, or play with clay or sand
Machines	42.6	Takes apart toys and electronics to see how they work

The special interests that interfered the most with daily functioning were schedules, objects and television.



## Meaning of the Research

Given the high occurrence of special interests in children with autism, it is important for professionals in the field to have a better understanding of this phenomenon. There is no doubt that special interests can impede daily functioning and may be socially isolating.<sup>1</sup> However, there may also be certain advantages to having a special interest.<sup>4</sup> Special interests can offer opportunities for social interaction by providing a shared interest with others. It can also generate feelings of well-being and coping strategies during difficult or stressful times, and provide skills for later employment.

In one survey of adults with autism, 96.2 percent of the participants felt that special interests should be encouraged in children, and that their own special interests had provided positive outcomes in their lives.<sup>4</sup>

In the study being reviewed here, most parents did not consider their child's special interest to be an interference.

The researcher's recommend that parents, caregivers and support workers encourage each child's special interests, no matter how unusual they may seem. More research is required in order to gain a better understanding of special interests in the autism community. This knowledge can help professionals and parents determine how to foster and direct special interests so they do not interfere with daily living, and how to provide supporting interventions to ensure positive outcomes.

Written by Autism Advocate Parenting Magazine

### References:

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