Research shows that between 65 percent and 88 percent of children with autism have at least one special interest. Special interests go beyond typical hobbies or interests. They are interests that are abnormal in intensity or focus, and are often considered an obsession. 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.

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.
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

Over 99.7% of parents/caregivers reported that their child had at least one special interest.

On average, children had 9 current special interests, with television, objects and music being the most common interests (See Table 1).

The average age of onset of special interests was 5.24 years old, with most special interests lasting more than two years.

Highly verbal males were the most likely to have special interests.

The number of current special interests seems to decline with age.

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

The researchers were not able to determine if certain types of special interests were more likely to last into adolescence.

### Table 1. The Top 10 Special Interest Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage of children with this SI</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Television</td>
<td>81.1</td>
<td>Videos on YouTube; watches the same movie over and over</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objects</td>
<td>72.3</td>
<td>Attached to certain things, such as balls, flashlights, spoons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music</td>
<td>67.1</td>
<td>Plays music all the time; knows the words to almost every song</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toys</td>
<td>58.8</td>
<td>Cars, Star Wars toys, My Little Pony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collections</td>
<td>53.1</td>
<td>Pokémon cards, trains, rocks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animals</td>
<td>50.2</td>
<td>Sharks, making animal sounds, dolphins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>46.0</td>
<td>Building with LEGO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation</td>
<td>45.3</td>
<td>Learns everything about cars; collects firetrucks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art</td>
<td>43.0</td>
<td>Loves to draw, or play with clay or sand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Machines</td>
<td>42.6</td>
<td>Takes apart toys and electronics to see how they work</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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. However, there may also be certain advantages to having a special interest. 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.

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.

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References: