

Many children with Autism Spectrum Disorders have a restricted range of interests, often becoming dependent on routines and rituals, and developing obsessions with particular items or activities.

Obsessive behaviour is an attempt by the person with an Autism Spectrum Disorder to cope with his/her environment by creating order, structure and a sense of control. Repetition makes the person feel safe and may relax him/her when distressed.

When attempting to modify obsessive behaviour, concentrate on those that are unacceptable, or that greatly interfere with the child's opportunities to learn, rather than behaviours that are simply odd.

It is preferable to steer the obsession into a socially acceptable or more productive form rather than attempt to eliminate it entirely, as this can result in the creation of a new obsession, which may be worse!

Aim to decrease the time the child spends in engaging in the obsessive behaviour until it is reduced to a manageable level. Recognise early (if possible) behaviours that are "emerging" obsessions as it is much easier to tackle them at this stage than when they have become entrenched.

Some behaviours can be related to a specific situation and can be limited or controlled by a change in location, time, routine or other aspect.

It may help to allocate specific periods of time when the child is allowed to indulge in his/her obsession. Try to limit the behaviour to a place or time, e.g. the child can line up the train set for ten minutes, or is allowed to discuss his/her special interest in one room or area only.

Obsessions and/or special interests can be used in a positive way, as they are generally powerful motivators for children with an Autism Spectrum Disorder. They can provide an opportunity for the teacher or parent to introduce an educational or constructive base. For example, for a child obsessed with trains, the train set could be used for counting the carriages, making and naming shapes with the track, sorting colours, and extending language. For the more able student, timetables and destinations could be explored.

Obsessions and/or special interests can also be used as a reward for less favoured activities.

Remember that items and events which are rewarding for many children may be meaningless to the child with an Autism Spectrum Disorder. Knowing the child's obsessions is extremely helpful when planning goals. An excellent resource is *Power cards: using special interests to motivate children and youth with Asperger syndrome and autism* by Elisa Gagnon.

Some strategies for dealing with obsessive behaviours:

- Introduce new activities by modelling.
- The child may be uncomfortable with unfamiliar activities and require de-sensitising.
- Introduce change gradually - that is, reduce the size of the items that the child may be obsessed with, or the time they are used.
- Teach other functional behaviours and skills.
- Show alternative ways to play. This will have to be repeated several times as children with Autism Spectrum Disorders lack creative skills.
- Manually guide the child to more appropriate play activities.
- Reward/reinforce appropriate play.
- Use social stories to encourage appropriate behaviours
- Plan time for the student to engage in activities of his/her own selection.
- Ignore or learn to live with behaviours that don't really matter or bother anyone.