

What Have Researchers Learned about Special Interests in Autism from SPARK Participants?

Summary Reports describe results from newly published research using data from SPARK participants.

■ Study Title

Characterization of Special Interests in Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Brief Review and Pilot Study Using the Special Interests Survey

■ What was the study about?

A common symptom of autism is having an intense focus on a topic or object, called a special interest. Special interests are not well understood because research on them is limited. Researchers wanted to learn more by using a new tool, the Special Interest Survey, that measures the types, number, duration, and perceived effect of special interests on people with autism.

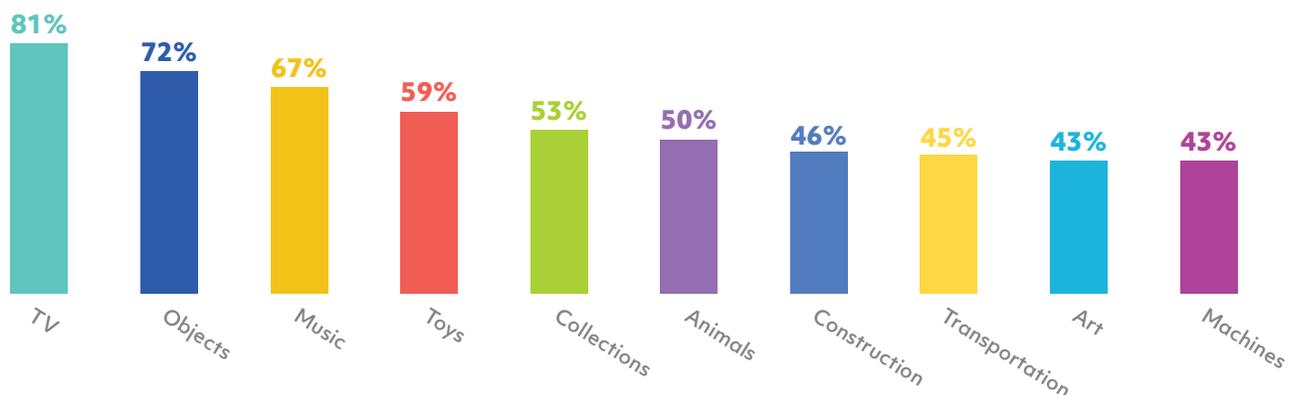
■ How was the research done?

Parents of 1,992 children in the SPARK autism study completed an online survey about the special interests of their child with autism. The children were ages 2 to 17 years old, with an average age of 9.

■ What did the researchers learn?

- Almost all of the children have had at least one special interest at some time.
- The children have an average of eight current special interests each. The most common interest is television, movies, and videos. Other common interests are objects (such as a particular car or flashlight), music, toys, collections (such as cards or rocks), and animals.

SPECIAL INTERESTS OF CHILDREN WITH AUTISM



- The least common interests, affecting fewer than 11 percent of the children, are schedules, history, physics, politics, and psychology.
- Children developed special interests at age 5, on average.
- Overall, parents said their children's special interests only rarely interfered with their daily lives. However, certain interests, such as schedules, objects, and television, were rated as interfering more often with daily life.

- Parents rated certain interests — such as time, people, schedules, numbers, objects, and things — as being more unusual than the interests of other children.
- The more unusual a parent thought an interest was, the more likely the parent rated it as interfering with daily life.
- Children may switch from one interest to another. Some past special interests had lasted for more than two years, parents reported.

■ What was new and innovative about the study?

This study used a new parent survey, called the Special Interest Survey (SIS), to measure special interests. To better include girls with autism, the SIS added examples of interests that are more often reported by girls, such as dancing, dolls, and horses. In the past, some scientists have wondered if autism surveys were geared mainly toward boys, who greatly outnumber girls with autism.

■ What do the findings mean?

Special interests are considered to be a symptom of autism that interferes with a person's functioning. However, parents generally did not report much interference. This suggests that parents see the interests as providing a benefit. More information about special interests, and their positive aspects, may deepen our understanding of autism and improve interventions and supports, the researchers say.

■ What are parents and scientists saying?

Parents:

"We used [my child's] obsessions to help [them] in therapy and worked to turn them into positives. I would love to see a focus on how to channel abilities for children on the autism spectrum."

"What a great way to find out what our children are into. Autism truly has a diverse set of interests. It was nice to feel our voices are being heard."

Researcher Kerri P. Nowell, Ph.D., assistant professor at University of Missouri: "Autism is an incredibly diverse condition, and our research shows that special interests reflect that diversity. I hope that we continue to value neurodiversity and how we can capitalize on the strengths of people who have autism, to ensure the best outcomes. Using special interests is a way to do that."

■ What's next?

Researchers will continue to test the accuracy of the new survey by measuring how autistic people report on their own special interests. Researchers also want to see how people who do not have autism describe their interests. Eventually, the survey could be used to incorporate a person's special interests into an autism intervention or to help autistic people develop career goals, Nowell says.

■ References

1. Nowell, K.P. *et al.* *J. Autism Dev. Disord.* Epub ahead of print (2020) [PubMed](#)

About SPARK Research Match

This SPARK program matches families with research studies that they may want to join. These studies have been evaluated for scientific merit and approved by a scientific committee at SPARK. The program is free to researchers and families. SPARK does not endorse or conduct these studies. Families choose if they want to participate in a particular study.