Top Tips for utilising special interests during the Covid-19 restrictions

Many autistic people have a special interest or interests. This is a subject or activity which the person is passionate about and able to focus intensely on. Whilst accessing some activities during this time may require creative thinking, there are lots of ways autistic people, parents and educators can harness special interests as a tool during this time.

**UNDERSTANDING COVID-19**

For some autistic people understanding COVID-19 may be difficult or even scary to think about. Is there a way to harness a special interest to support this? If the special interest is a band – how are its members coping at present? If it is an academic subject how does COVID-19 relate to it? Try to use a special interest as a way of putting our present reality into context.

**SUPPORT DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATION**

Most autistic people are not able to access their usual therapeutic or educational supports. This can be stressful and many people will find it hard to do the same work or activities from a home setting. It is important to accept that output or expectations may have to be different at this time but harnessing a special interest to teach new skills or access the curriculum can be a fun way of staying on top of things! For example, if your special interest is movies – you can create a project which will help with writing, presentation and organisation skills or look at the numbers and statistics behind the box office! Special interests can also be a great tool for teaching turn-taking, conversation skills or social situations.

**FIND A WAY TO ACCESS IT**

Some creativity may be needed to access some special interests at present! If you are passionate about horse riding or like to go to the Zoo this may not be possible right now but there are still ways you can engage! Is there a webcam service or app you can follow? Are there videos or replays? What gives you the most enjoyment from your special interest – is there a way to simulate this from home? The internet is filled with ideas for doing things differently at this time so get searching!

**LIST WHAT YOU CAN DO**

Even if we are really passionate about something it can get boring if we are too limited! At the moment there is lots of coverage about what we can’t do – let’s use special interests to think of all that we can do! Make a list of activities you could do arising from your special interest – online courses, games, books, websites, crafts…the list goes on! Use this as your menu to fight boredom – when you feel it setting in pick a new activity to enjoy!

**SET GOALS**

Goals keep us focused and give us a sense of purpose. It is important to not demand too much of ourselves at this time but it is a good idea to set achievable goals for the period. Use your special interest to do this in an engaging way. Are you going to try to read something new about the topic each day? Could you use this time to sort, tidy or catalogue your collection? Is there something you have always wanted to make but never had the time? Give it a go and use it as a tool to structure each day and week.

**CREATE A PORTFOLIO**

Many autistic people find it easier to demonstrate by “doing” as opposed to “talking”. Whilst the present pandemic is posing many challenges for our community it is also challenging many long established “norms” in the workplace. When restrictions are lifted we will be in a very new employment climate which will present challenges and opportunities for the community. If you are of an age where you are thinking about college or work, and want to work in the same area as your special interest, why not use this time to create a portfolio of your work? Put together photographs, essays, drawings, codes or whatever is relevant to your field of interest. You can use this portfolio to demonstrate your skillset and interest to course providers and employers or as a springboard to setting up your own business.

**STAY CONNECTED**

It is so important to not be isolated at this time – we all need to talk to other people even if it can only be through phone or video calls. If you haven’t seen a person in a while, such as a school friend or extended family member, it can be difficult to know what to say. Use your special interest to create a common activity to talk about – can you both cook something at the same time, play a quiz online or watch the same TV show from your own houses? This gives you a structure and keeps the conversation going.

**AGREE A SPACE**

Many of us are living, working and socialising alongside other family members at this time. Space can be tight and there can be many activities going on at once. Does your special interest involve setting things up that can’t be moved? Is your special interest is noisy or require other people to be quiet? Agree a space or time of day which is put aside for your activity. This will prevent arguments and also ensure you have the space to properly engage in it! It is also a good idea, if possible, to make the space distinct from where you may do school or work so that you can keep your mind clear when doing both!

**SHARE YOUR KNOWLEDGE**

Now could be a great time to share your knowledge or skills with the world! Have you ever created a YouTube video or blog about your interest? Have you ever talked about your interest or shown your work on social media? Have you ever joined an online group for people with similar interests? Now could be a great time to share your skills with other people – it can be fun to do and enable you to engage more deeply in your interests! If you haven’t done this before it is a good idea to ask someone for help on where to get started and, as always, to consider your privacy and safety online.

**THERE IS A TIME FOR EVERYTHING**

Everything in moderation is always an important thing to remember! Special interests provide us with structure, routine and joy! It is important that we also plan for doing the essential activities we have to do each day such as exercise, chores and academic or school work! You can always use a daily schedule to break these tasks up – maybe something you dislike or find tiring can be followed by some time enjoying your favourite activity before going on to the next task!

Autism Hampshire can advise you remotely on managing at this time,

please contact the team - 02380 766162 / information.advice@autismhampshire.org.uk