

STRAIGHT TALK *About Autism*

Barry M. Prizant, Ph.D., CCC-SLP

The Cup Half Full: Nurturing Interests, Strengths, and Talents

A FEW DECADES AGO, THE NURTURING OF SPECIAL INTERESTS IN INDIVIDUALS WITH ASD WAS RELATIVELY RARE, owing to the common practice of dismissing them as examples of obsessive or perseverative behavior. Today, caregivers now recognize that when we identify, acknowledge, and nurture a person's interests, strengths, and talents, and when we connect them to opportunities for social, academic, and/or vocational growth, the positive impact on a person's life is endless. Notwithstanding, for parents dealing with the everyday challenges of raising a child with ASD, and for professionals working to support development of academics, self-help skills, etc., the question still remains: *How do we go about recognizing and nurturing the seeds of interests and talents so that they may blossom?*

I have found that the strategies to address these challenges are as individual as persons with ASD and the interests they manifest. Before sharing what I have learned from creative parents, educators, therapists, and artists over the years, I'd like to illustrate what can happen when parents and practitioners think creatively about how a person's interests and talent can be used in the short term to solve problems, and in the long term to support and enhance many aspects of life.

1. A few weeks ago, I heard from some parents that I had met early in my career as a college professor. They contacted me regarding their son Mike, now 44 years old. As I listened to their familiar voices on the phone, I vividly remembered that Mike, at nine years of age, could listen to a song on the radio and then immediately and accurately pick out the notes on the piano. To the astonishment of

many, Mike also was able to identify the notes of car horns on the street, due to his having perfect pitch. His parents shared, with great pride, how his musical strengths had led to his playing piano and organ at church, a place where previously they did not feel welcome, owing to Mike's difficulty sitting quietly during services as a child. They noted that Mike is still playing piano and organ at church, sings in the church choir, and lives semi-independently in the community.

2. In preparation for writing this article, I contacted the parents of Justin Canha, a 20-year-old artist with ASD, whom I have known since he was four years old. Coincidentally, his father told me that he was about to give a presentation at an ASD conference about his family's journey over the past 15 or so years. Over the years, I have watched with great pride as Justin has developed into a fine young man with a clear identity as an artist. When I first met Justin, he was able to draw cartoon characters, could communicate through a few signs, but was not yet able to speak. Despite Justin's success and the critical acclaim his work has received, his parents are very clear that what is most important is not his success in the visual arts, but how Justin's art has enhanced his quality of life. He now has many social opportunities; has made new friends; and even teaches art to elementary school students.
3. During a recent high school consultation, I met a young man who was recently diagnosed with Asperger's Disorder. Jake had gotten off to a good start in school, but after three months, he shut down and looked very depressed. When I first met Jake, he was seated slumped



Artist Justin Canha with his Tigers

in his chair, with his head turned away and his blond hair covering his eyes. After acknowledging some of the difficulties he was having, I asked him, “What is your favorite thing about school?” He turned in my direction, slowly swept his hair from his eyes, and said, “Dismissal.” His teachers were concerned that it was becoming increasingly difficult to engage Jake; however, his history teacher shared that he had recently discovered that Jake was a self-taught artist, and began to allow him to draw on the whiteboard for a few minutes before class. Since this began, Jake appears happier in school, and has become more verbal in class.

The Case for Nurturing Interests, Strengths, and Talents

There are many reasons to identify and nurture interests, strengths, and talents in individuals with ASD—some of them very practical, such as developing enjoyable leisure skills and hobbies, a challenge for many persons on the spectrum. Another reason is that in the long-term, specific interests, strengths, and talents may lead to greater independence and success in vocational endeavors. Less obvious reasons are to support an individual’s self-esteem or to create an opportunity for socialization, both of which are enhanced when a person is able to share his or her interests and talents with others, whether in formal venues such as performances and art shows or in everyday activities.

Importantly, participation in such activities as the expressive arts related to one’s interests and strengths may play an

important role in supporting a well-regulated emotional state. Finally, when caregivers focus on an individual’s competence (strengths and talents) rather than on his or her limitations, it is easier to develop a more balanced view of the whole person.

Guidelines for Developing Interests, Strengths, and Talents

At this point, you may be thinking, “easier said than done!” Thankfully, we now have the guidance of parents and other caregivers who have walked this path. I would like to acknowledge the work of Brian Canha, the father of artist Justin Canha, for providing a

“do’s and don’ts” framework for developing the interests, talents, and strengths of individuals with ASD. The following is an adaptation of his ten-point guide.

1. Do look for areas of interest, aptitude, and enjoyment.

What captures your child’s attention? Are there particular toys, topics, books, or sensory experiences that keep your child engaged? Does your child demonstrate or express positive emotion, excitement, contentment, or a particular heightened focus of attention when engaged in a particular activity? For verbal children, does your child frequently request particular activities, or ask many questions about a subject of interest?

2. Don’t expect to understand why these interests exist; where they may lead; or how long they will last.

In particular, do not judge interests in terms of conventionality or logic, as they may be unconventional or defy logical thinking. Initially, we want to observe patterns of interests that will enable us to move forward and think of creative possibilities along the way. As with all children, some interests may represent phases that pass.

3. Do nurture the interest(s) and help the person find a place for it in his or her life.

Try to understand the specific qualities that underlie the preferred activity or interest and how they may relate to, and be provided in everyday routines and activities. For example, is it appropriate to allow the interest to be

pursued as a solitary activity (e.g., drawing) as a time to “chill out” and regulate emotionally? Or, is it the type of interest that you could eventually parlay into a social endeavor?

Do not judge interests in terms of conventionality or logic, as they may be unconventional or defy logical thinking.

4. Don’t allow the interest(s) to interfere with a child’s progress in other areas.

We would all love to participate in activities that focus on our interests for the majority of our waking hours; however, individuals with ASD must also learn the skills that will enable them to participate successfully in everyday activities. Whenever possible, use interests to motivate and develop the acquisition of important skills, and allow for the interest to be pursued on a regular basis; but also recognize that it is not possible to engage in such activities the majority of the time.

5. Do be creative and persistent in introducing new ways for the child to enjoy and employ his or her interest(s).

Think creatively about how interests may be used to encourage participation in a broader range of activities.

For example, one young child who had an intense interest in Winnie-the-Pooh and other Pooh characters had difficulty paying attention during the morning meeting in his kindergarten classroom. His mother suggested that the activity incorporate some of his interests, and she gave the teacher some Winnie-the-Pooh stickers. His teacher responded by including the stickers in the discussion of the calendar (Monday was Tigger day; Tuesday, Pooh day; and so forth), which greatly enhanced the child’s interest and participation.

6. Don’t expect that attempts to relate the interest(s) to other activities will always succeed.

As we attempt to connect and apply interests to other activities in a person’s life, it may be difficult to predict whether such attempts will be successful. In fact, we may get clear messages from a person that it is confusing or

Often, the basis of friendships and relationships is that of common interests and shared experiences.

stressful to even make such attempts. For example, one child loved to play *Blue's Clues* at home with his family. When an attempt was made to use this game in a social skills group at school, he did not wish to do so; however, his mother successfully encouraged him to ask visitors to his home to play this game with him.

7. Do expose the person to others who have similar interests.

Often, the basis of friendships and relationships is that of common interests and shared experiences. When we look for those who have similar interests, there is great potential for joining with others and experiencing many positive influences. This may occur during playtime for younger children, or in venues such as afterschool clubs for older individuals. I have known many children with ASD who have developed wonderful friendships through Lego® or science clubs, music and theater activities, and art programs.

8. Don't limit the scope of these contacts to the community of persons with disabilities.

With the best of intentions, we sometimes create activities and opportunities based on interests that are limited to groups of people with special needs. Such activities may provide positive experiences, but we should also look towards making connections with typical peers around the interests and talents of those with ASD. In fact, when a child is able to demonstrate confidence and competence in areas of interest, it often "levels the playing field."

9. Do look for practical applications of the person's interest(s) or aptitude.

We need to ask ourselves how the person's ability or interest can be applied, practically, in meaningful and/or functional activities. For example, a high school student

Look towards making connections with typical peers around the interests and talents of those with ASD.

I know (who uses a speech-generating device) has exceptional visual-pattern perception, and he has learned through a color-coding system to sort and deliver mail along with a typical peer in his school. This activity provides the movement he needs in the morning, as well as many social opportunities. Another student with similar strengths works as an assistant to the chemistry lab teacher, helping to organize and maintain materials in the lab.

10. Don't try to fit a square peg into a round hole.

Too often, we expect individuals with ASD to be motivated and to succeed in activities that are not a good match for their learning style and interests. By identifying and nurturing interests, strengths, and talents, we are much more likely to be successful in supporting their development, not only in their areas of interest—but with a little creativity—in many other areas of life as well. 

Resources

ARTS: A Film about Possibilities, Disabilities, & the Arts (film); directed by Keri Bowers

Autism: The Musical (film); Tricia Regan, filmmaker

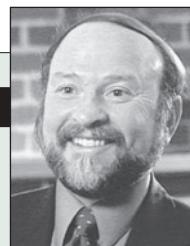
Developing Talents: Careers for Individuals with Asperger Syndrome and High-Functioning Autism; by Temple Grandin and Kate Duffy

Exiting Nirvana: A Daughter's Life with Autism; by Clara Claiborne Park

Just Give Him the Whale: 20 Ways to Use Fascinations, Areas of Expertise, and Strengths to Support Students with Autism; by Paula Kluth and Patrick Schwarz

Remarkably Able: Walking the Path to Talents, Interests, and Personal Growth; by Jackie Marquette

Website for artist Justin Canha: www.justinart.com



Dr. Barry Prizant is the Director of Childhood Communication Services and an adjunct professor in the Center for the Study of Human Development, Brown University. Barry has more than 35 years of experience as a researcher and international consultant to children and adults with ASD. He has published more than 90 articles and chapters on childhood communication disorders and has given more than 500 seminars and workshops at national and international conferences. He also serves on the Editorial Boards of six scholarly journals. Barry is a co-author of the SCERTS Model (Prizant, Wetherby, Rubin, Laurent & Rydell, 2006—www.SCERTS.com). In 2005, Barry received the Princeton University-Eden Foundation Career Award "for improving the quality of life for individuals with autism". For further information about Barry's work, go to www.barryprizant.com, or contact Barry at Bprizant@aol.com.