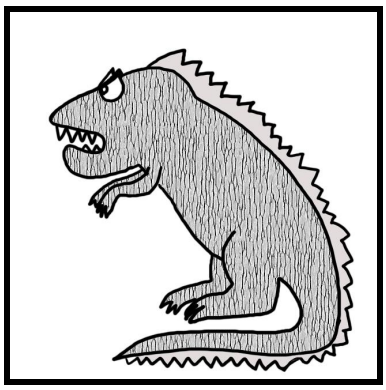
Communication Spot •

By Lucia Smith BSpPath. MSPA Speech Pathologist

SPECIAL INTERESTS



Over the years I have worked with many children with obsessive interests; Thomas the Tank, building structures, reptiles, cats... Whether your child is verbal or non-verbal, a topic can dominate conversation and communication attempts, to the point where nothing else seems to matter.

One child, I worked with was Joseph, a very cluey three year old with no formal means of communication and he was obsessed with something rather odd. It was eggs or anything egg-shaped. You can imagine the nightmare of taking him shopping during Easter - he would scream to hold every egg that he spotted. And believe me, he could scream!

So, what should you do about such an unusual obsession? Where it came from, his family had no idea. They tried to hide eggs, avoid the egg aisle in the supermarket, even footballs were egg-like enough for Joseph's demands. But like many fixations, Joseph's love of eggs became the key to learning to communicate. Very quickly, given the opportunity, this young boy learnt to request an egg using "picture exchange". Soon, he began saying "egg" as he handed over the picture and within one month, he was stringing together the pictures "I want" and "egg". From this, the world of communication opened up, and a range of other requests were learnt.

Verbal children too, can become obsessed with certain topics and the origins of these can be perplexing. "My son loves hair" one mother explained to me when I first met her. On meeting Mitch, he immediately remarked (much to my dismay) that my hair

had three colours – “Blonde, brown and grey in the middle.” He could describe all sorts of colours, lengths and styles, his parents having no idea where he had picked up some of the terms.

So the origins may be a mystery, but several reasons behind “special interests” have been put forward. For many children with autism, consistency is important. This can be seen in play, as well as communication. Talking about a familiar, consistent topic may be calming for a child as the required language is rehearsed and the knowledge behind it cemented. Speaking about something familiar may make the child feel the master of an otherwise difficult and unpredictable conversation. Why tackle other topics if they may possibly cause confusion?

The special interest can also give the child a source of identity. From an early age, adults may attempt to speak with an otherwise withdrawn child around the topic that I generates the most speech. Aunties buy books on the subject, Grandpa finds a computer game about it, and next thing you know this is what the child has become; the boy who loves trains, or the girl who loves cats. (Mind you, many children are very happy to find their interest acknowledged).

And one final thing may help maintain preoccupations with a certain topic – and this is the lack of “theory of mind” (discussed in the last Communication Spot article). Children with autism usually have an under-developed sense of how and what another person might be thinking and given this lack of insight, they may fail to pick up on signs of boredom or agitation in the listener. If I love talking about sportscars…doesn’t everyone?!

Use it or lose it?

Temple Grandin, a well-known woman with ASD has stressed in many of her writings and seminars to use special interests to help a child learn new skills. Obsessions can be powerful motivators. Many childhood fixations have led to successful vocations later in life, where the passion and the knowledge are put to good use. Temple Grandin’s obsession with cattle chutes, for example, led to a career in designing livestock handling systems as an adult.

A creative parent, teacher or therapist can tailor an obsession to teach a range of skills. Depending on your speech and language goals, you can help a child learn anything from new sentence structures, new vocabulary, prepositions and past/future tenses. For example, if a child loves to talk about dogs, you use a toy dog to practise asking the dog a range of questions. “What do you like to eat?” “Where do you sleep?” “What do you play with?” etc… Take turns to “be the dog” so the child gets a chance at asking and responding to different question-types. To teach prepositions, you might place the dog in different positions around the room and get the child to tell you where the dog is – behind the chair, between the chairs, under the window, next to the vase…

When Obsessions Become a Problem

I would only recommend to deal with an obsession if it is interfering with socialising or learning and it is likely at some point that this may be the case.

One way to deal with obsessional talk is to allocate a special time and place when the child is free to talk about the topic as much as they please. The other option is to discourage the talk for small periods – particularly when the topic is not appropriate or when it is interfering the most…

One little girl I worked with many years ago loved to talk about cats and believe it or not, stockings. These were two of favourite topics and luckily they were always kept separate (there were no cats in stockings!) But the talk about cats often wore thin, as Kathryn knew that I didn’t have a cat, was allergic to cats, and I’d heard about her cat many a time. When the talk of cats ran dry, Kathryn would often switch to stockings, and this would go on for the first ten minutes of each session. I had tried to use the topics to help with her learning … but finally I thought I’d try something.

One day I made a visual prompt for Kathryn prior to the session, and after a quick talk about cats on entering the room, I told her “Let’s try and not talk about cats for a little while.” I took a picture of a cat and stuck it to the NO TALKING board. (The board simply showed some lips with a red cross through them). Surprisingly, this worked. Kathryn seemed almost relieved. Even more surprising was when switching her talk to stockings, she soon stopped herself, ripped off a piece of paper and scribbled a picture. “These are stockings,” she said . “Let’s not talk about them either.” With a smile, she stuck it on the board.

I have used a DON’T TALK ABOUT… board (see next page) many times with children, but it is important to vary the time that you limit the talk, always gauging their level of stress. Using the word “try” (“Let’s try and not talk about….) is also important

as it acknowledges that this may be difficult for the child and will often encourage them to give it a go.

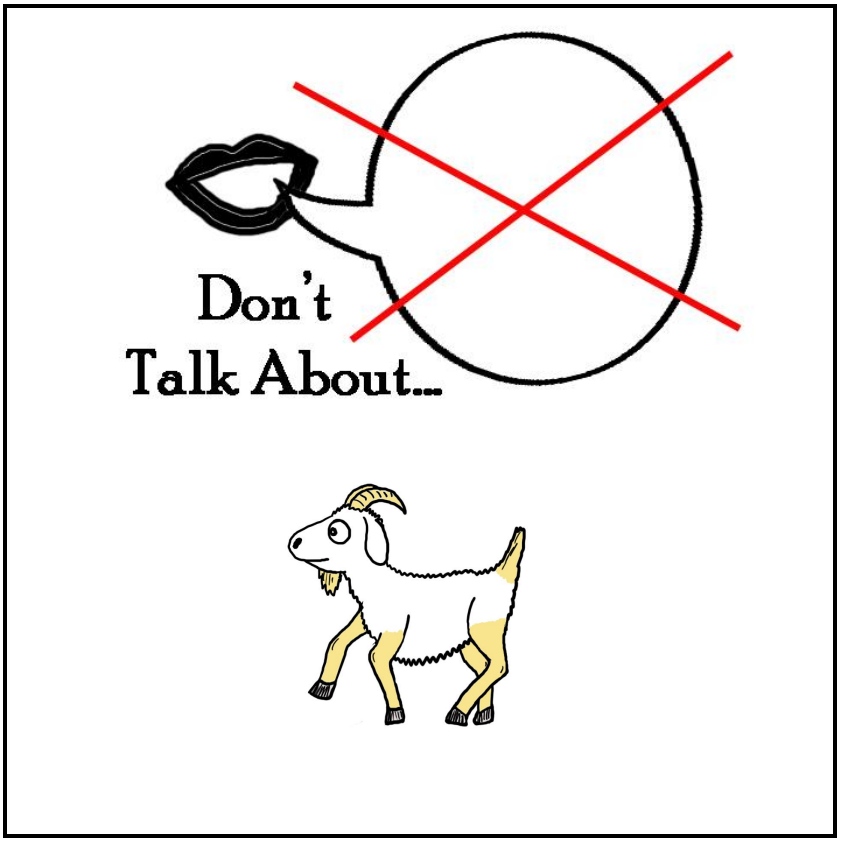
Finally, it's important to explain to the child why you are asking them to limit their talk. This comes back to helping the child understand that communication is a two-way process and that the listener (or listeners) might feel bored or annoyed if the talk is just on one topic. Explain that different people may be interested in different things and that they may not want to hear too much about the special topic.

And in this day and age, our children are lucky. If your child is at the stage where they can use the internet, a whole world of people with similar interests is only a Google – search away. Here, they can chat to their heart's content with a whole band of like-minded others.

If you have any questions or comments about special interests, I'd love to hear from you.

Lucia Smith Pelican Talk Speech Therapy Resources

www.pelicantalk.com



Download the Don't Talk About… board from www.pelicantalk.com