We often talk about obsessive behaviour with people with an autism spectrum disorder, or we may use terms like a special interest or we may talk about it as being something where we can’t get them to move off a topic because they’ll talk about that topic incessantly or over and over and over again to the extent that it actually impacts on their ability to have any legitimate social interaction with people around them.

And I guess one of the challenges often when we’re working with young people with an autism spectrum disorder who have those special interests, it’s about sometimes actually trying to ask ourselves, ‘Rather than trying to walk away from that interest area, how do we build on that interest area and use that interest area to develop their social skills, their competencies, and in many ways, their, you know, literacy and numeracy exercises?’

And I’m often intrigued when people will say to me, "Look, this little fellow, he’s just obsessed about trains." Or, "He’s just obsessed about timetables," or whatever.

You know, I worked with a young man - when I say young man, a boy - some years ago and he could memorise every train schedule and every bus schedule. And of course the problem would be that when you were talking about then going somewhere or doing something, he would then recite every bus and every train that would get you there for the day. Now, that would be great if you were actually wanting to get that information. But one of the challenges for us is not so much to dissuade people from that but to understand and try and see what are the drivers and what are the triggers for prompting and stimulating that conversation.

Now, sometimes it’s purely through interest. At other times, it may be because that young person is experiencing some anxiety or some concern and as a result, would use that as a way of kind of covering for themselves while they’re trying to make sense of the world around them. I think, though, the challenge for us is to actually make the best use of those interests and the best use of that obsession to kind of build on the skills and the social skills of that individual.
And so, for example, we often would talk to schools and often talk to schools about young people that might have a compulsion... a compulsive interest in an area and actually say to them, "Well, rather than seeing that as a negative, why couldn't we see that as a positive? Why couldn't you leverage off that and say to this young person, OK, if you can behave well and can do these particular tasks today, I'm then going to let you do a presentation to the class around your particular interest."

Let's use, for example, a young person who might have an interest in vacuum cleaners or something similar. So rather than talking against that, you could use that interest to encourage that young person to look at what's the history of vacuum cleaners? Where did they develop from? What sort of... What you see as being the future of the vacuum cleaner? Or you can use that as a means of saying, "We're going to give you an opportunity to present to the class around a vacuum cleaner, but you need to write that out first. You need to create PowerPoints for it". And not simply dismiss that interest, but actually leverage off that interest as an opportunity to develop the individual skills.

Now, it's not always going to work and it's not always going to be the right thing to do, but it would be a shame to dismiss a person's special interest because we don't see value in it, when we can leverage off that value. You can certainly ask them or you can certainly often take them to a shop and you could say, "OK, we want to now go into the electrical store and I want you to count the numbers of vacuum cleaners that are in there. Count up what are the numbers of assorted items that go with the vacuum cleaner."

There's enormous range of activities that we can do with people around their special interest if we think more creatively and think a little bit outside the square. So we could... We can talk about and use it for literacy. We can talk about their interests and expressions of interest in terms of their numeracy. We can talk about it in terms of art and creativity.

We can talk about it and use it in ways of saying, "Well, how do you use this the best way possible in a house? What would be the instructions you'd give to your mother or to your father or to your friends if they were wanting to use a vacuum cleaner?"

So the challenge for us is that when we're talking about and looking at people's obsessions, it is about not seeing them as being an obsession, but rather as a vehicle. And I would encourage you to think about them as a vehicle. Look at using things like photocopying pictures. Using things then asking them to go off and research it. Ask them to look at the companies that manufacture these things. Get them to use the internet to explore that further. But also then to grow on that and to say, "OK, we've now spent 5 minutes, 10 minutes talking about vacuum cleaners. Let's now look at..." and move on to another topic.

Let's talk to them about the social rules of special interests. And the social rules are not that you can talk to your friend about vacuum cleaners for 30 minutes. It's that you can talk to your friend for 2 or 3 minutes but then you need to ask them to talk about their special interest. The other area here, and it's often missed, I think, is that if you are working with a young person who has those social deficits and therefore has no friendship networks, it's sometimes worthwhile looking to see whether there are other people that might have similar interests that you can link this person into.
For example, I know that those people that have a special interest in computers and computer technology, there are a number of clubs now being set up for young people that have those interests to come together and through that process, they learn turn taking, they learn skilling, they learn sharing. They learn a whole range of social skills without realising what they’re learning. And so the encouragement would be not only to look at the special interest to develop their academic skills, if you like - their literacy, numeracy, etc. etc. - but you should also use these things as an opportunity to introduce social rules as well around conversation, around turn taking, around expressing interest in other people and so on and so on.

So don’t ever see a special interest as being a negative. My view would be you should always see it as being a positive. If you do, it’s remarkable how you can grow interest out of that and develop a person’s skills.

Thank you.