

LIFE, ANIMATED

COMPANION GUIDE FOR EDUCATORS





The Suskind Family

Photo courtesy of A&E IndieFilms

INTRODUCTORY INFORMATION

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a developmental disability characterized by nonstandard perception and processing of environmental information resulting in differences of behavior, social communication, movement, and sensory processing. Additionally, the presence of focused interest areas, or “affinities,” is one of the most prevalent features of ASD. Historically, these preferred interests have been viewed negatively, as reflected in the language commonly used to describe them: “restricted,” “perseverative,” and “obsessions.” Researchers argued that these problematic behaviors should be discouraged, and even eliminated, claiming that they contributed to behavioral rigidity and interfered with individuals developing peer relationships. However, current literature is shifting away from this deficit-based perspective, towards an abilities-based model acknowledging the importance and power of these preferred interests¹⁻⁴.

Following the lead of autistic self-advocates, research and practice is now shifting to a more strengths-based perspective, recognizing the importance and power of affinities to encourage social interactions, mitigate anxiety, and even identify employment possibilities. In the wake of the book, *Life, Animated*, in 2014 and the movie two years later, leading researchers and clinicians believe that these special interests may be used as “code-breakers” by the individual to decipher their emotions, their relationships and interactions with others, and find their place in the wider world. Though video-based affinities like Owen’s are prevalent, individuals with ASD use many interests, from dinosaurs and astronomy to Disney films, in this way. This film portrays how special interests can be a powerful tool for supporting individuals with ASD, highlighting how important it is for teams to be creative and flexible, and to explore these interests in order to see what works for each individual with ASD.



Owen Suskind

Photo courtesy of A&E IndieFilms

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This guide is meant to facilitate discussion among teachers, therapists and professionals that may challenge assumptions about autism and to highlight latest research. Please screen the film *LIFE, ANIMATED* in its entirety.

- Preview questions can be used prior to screening the film to highlight specific themes and situations to look for throughout the film.
- Discussion questions can be used for a more in-depth look at the thoughts, feelings and insights once the film has been viewed.
- Guidelines for teachers and therapists are suggestions for integrating a student's special interests into their classrooms and interactions with their students. Encourage participants to generate their own additional ideas as to how they can use their students' interests in their own settings.
- Facilitators can use the "What's your commitment?" to begin to get concrete ideas from the group as to how their own practices may be enhanced or changed. By committing to an action step after viewing the film, there is a greater opportunity for impact and to carry the message of *LIFE, ANIMATED* beyond the screen.

**Owen Suskind**

Photo courtesy of A&E IndieFilms

PREVIEWING QUESTIONS

- This film highlights a paradigm shift in the autism field: a move away from a deficit view of “nonfunctional perseverations” to a strengths-based view of “special interest areas” or affinities. Watch for ways in which Owen’s family leads the team in honoring and leveraging the power of Owen’s interests.
- In many cases, therapies for students with ASD are done to the child/young adult, rather than *with* the child/young adult. Therapists can fall into the pattern of sitting on the opposite side of the table from their client, demanding and negotiating, rather than sitting beside their client and truly collaborating. Describe how you see different members of Owen’s team responding. How does that seem to impact Owen’s motivation, success, and independence?
- Transitioning into adulthood and having greater independence is a time that is filled with both excitement and anxiety; a time of many changes that, even if they are positive, are rarely comfortable. During this time, it is important to give support that is both impactful and respectful to people with autism, recognizing that they may experience change in their own way. Pay attention to the different feelings Owen has about his transition to adulthood, and how his team tries to support him during this time of transition.
- Owen benefitted from the support of an extensive team including his parents, therapists, and, importantly, his brother. Siblings can be an important part of the team that allows people with autism to realize their potential. It is a difficult balance for siblings to be supportive without becoming another parent; we want to enjoy a typical sibling relationship. Reflect on the role that Owen’s brother Walt plays on his team, and consider how that role changes as Owen transitions into adulthood.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How did Owen’s family lead the team in recognizing, following, and encouraging Owen’s special interest? What was the impact of this shift on Owen being able to lead a self-determined life? How did this impact his feelings of *competence*, his *independence*, and his ability to *relate to others*?
- Some of the language used in the film in reference to Owen’s autism, “prison,” “drowning,” “stolen,” highlights the perception of ASD in the 90s, as well as the intense emotions that his family was experiencing at that time. How can we as educators validate the experiences of families and also encourage a strengths-focused view?
- Many educators focus on encouraging “age-appropriate” interests, especially as students move through middle and high school into adulthood. However, if special interests are disregarded and were viewed as “immature” or “meaningless” opportunities for connection may be missed. How was Owen’s family able to celebrate and channel his interest in Disney as he grew up? Scholars of myth like Joseph Campbell and Maria Tatar would assert that these fables have been told for thousands of years and are anything but simple. Have individuals with ASD, self-directed and often inattentive to society’s “supposed to’s,” recognized the universality of these stories? What else do their compensatory abilities in pattern recognition help them see that are often overlooked?

GUIDELINES FOR TEACHERS AND THERAPISTS ON USING INTERESTS

This film represents a shift in a significant issue within autism education: Owen’s special interest is respected, valued, and validated, as opposed to being pathologized as a perseveration or obsession.

Here are four different ways educators can incorporate a student’s special interests into the school day.

1. Follow a student’s lead

If a student uses language or makes gestures that may be related to a special interest, play along! Watch what a student focuses most of his or her time and emotion on. This may be a special interest area. They may be afraid to tell you what they love or think about. Draw them out, embrace them as an expert, and have them “teach” you something.

2. Provide frequent references to the interest

Mention your student’s special interest at any opportunity. For a reluctant reader who loves insects, a cut out picture of an ant at the end of a popsicle stick can make a motivating pointer to move as they read line-by-line. Even something as simple as stickers of stars and planets can make an astronomy buff more comfortable and excited about her work.

3. Use the language of the special interest

Find a way to use the language of your student’s interest to motivate him. For example, for a Star Wars fan, being told to “use the force to finish the last two problems” will probably help more than, “let’s finish—you’re almost done.” A child who has a particular hero connected to her interest, might love to hear, “You’re racing through this writing homework like Lightning McQueen on the race track!” (from the movie Cars).

4. Teach through a metaphor

Sometimes the facts and information of a student’s interest connect to the task or expectation they might struggle with. Think of ways that your student’s challenge relates to an aspect of their interest. For a student who struggles with flexibility, but who loves Angry Birds, you can remind them that we occasionally need to use a different strategy by saying, “Sometimes we just need to try to use a different bird. Can we switch to the yellow bird for this?” For a fan of Disney princesses having a hard time waiting in line at the grocery store, encourage her, “I know you can wait patiently, just like Snow White did for Prince Charming!”

Please note: Educators should never withhold something motivating from a student and then force a student to earn it back. Doing this can compromise a student’s comfort, motivation, and trust.

WHAT'S YOUR COMMITMENT?

Change happens not when people are exposed to new ideas, but when they commit to putting those ideas into action. How will YOU use ...

Write your commitment here:

RESOURCE LIST

These resources complement and augment the ideas explored in LIFE, ANIMATED. Scientific in nature, they provide evidence of the importance of identifying special interest areas and harnessing them for social and emotional learning. Additionally, they show that through the use of special interest areas, educators can unleash great compensatory strengths in individuals with ASD. These strengths, both intellectual and interpersonal, highlight the potential for individuals with ASD to thrive in the workforce and in society with the proper supports.

1. **Brief Report: A Pilot Summer Robotics Camp to Reduce Social Anxiety and Improve Social/Vocational Skills in Adolescents with ASD.** <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/24898910> (behind a paywall) This study used a shared interest in robotics among participants with ASD to decrease social anxiety and increase a wide range of skills.

Kaboski, J. R., Diehl, J. J., Beriont, J., Crowell, C. R., Villano, M., Wier, K., & Tang, K. (2014). *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*. doi:10.1007/s 3-014-2153-3

2. **Brief Report: Character Strengths in Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder Without Intellectual Impairment.** <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/27457365> (behind a paywall)

This study assess character strengths in adults with ASD.

Kircher, J.C., Ruch, W., & Dziobek, I. (2016). *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*. Advance online publication. doi: 10.1007/s10803-016-2865-7.

3. **Towards successful employment of adults with autism: A first analysis of special interests and factors deemed important for vocational performance.** <http://www.sjcapp.org/article/view/15858> (behind a paywall) This study suggests that special interest areas among individuals with asd are key to their employment potential.

Kirchner, J. C., & Dziobek, I. (2014). *Scandinavian Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Psychology*, 2(2), 77–85.

4. **Case studies on using strengths and interests to address the needs of students with autism spectrum disorders.** <http://isc.sagepub.com/content/47/3/175.abstract> (behind a paywall) This article presents strategies created for individual students with autism spectrum disorders in upper elementary classes that capitalize on the students' affinities as a way of meeting their challenges at school.

Lanou, A., Hough, L., & Powell, E. (2012). *Intervention in School and Clinic*. 47(3), 175-182. doi: 10.3102/0034654315604027

5. **A compensatory role for declarative memory in neurodevelopmental disorders.**

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/25597655> This paper reviews evidence of declarative memory functions in those with neurodevelopmental disorders, and discusses its role in compensating for neurological deficits.

6. **From Tarantulas to Toilet Brushes: Understanding the Special Interest Areas of Children and Youth With Asperger Syndrome.** <http://rse.sagepub.com/content/28/3/140.short> This study conducted surveys and interviews with autistic children and young adults, and their parents. The researchers found that individuals with ASD showed large improvements in areas of deficit when participating in activities relating to their special interests.

7. **How Far Can Brian Ride the Daylight 4449 Express?** <http://foa.sagepub.com/content/22/2/67.abstract> This article builds on the findings of the previous study to develop a strength-based model of ASD and provide ideas for incorporating special interest areas in daily life.

8. *Characterization and Utilization of Preferred Interests: A Survey of Adults on the Autism Spectrum. Occupational Therapy in Mental Health*. Patten Koenig, K. & Hough Williams, L. (in press). This descriptive study examined the role that preferred interests played in an adult population with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). Results showed that participants have a positive view of preferred interests, view preferred interests as a way to mitigate anxiety and engage in vocational and avocational pursuits.

9. *Affinities: Should Therapy Be This Much Fun?*

https://affinitytherapy.sciencesconf.org/conference/affinitytherapy/pages/Should_therapy_be_this_much_fun_Suskind_Griffin.pdf
This article, written by Owen's mom, dad, and therapist for a conference on special interest areas (called "affinities" in the article), develops the basis for a new form of therapy and provides strategies for parents and therapists to use special interest areas to reach children with ASD.

10. *The Israeli Army Unit that Recruits Teens with Autism* <http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2016/01/israeli-army-autism/422850/> This Atlantic article describes a unit of the Israeli Defense Force that recruits individuals with autism because of their unique observation and pattern-recognition abilities.

11. *TED Talk with Temple Grandin*

https://www.ted.com/talks/temple_grandin_the_world_needs_all_kinds_of_minds?language=en
In this TED talk, Temple Grandin describes why the world needs autistic minds.

12. *Autism's Powerful Affinities: Prison or Pathway*

<https://videocast.nih.gov/Summary.asp?File=18402&bhcp=1> In this talk at the National Institute of Health, Ron Suskind explains how Owen and other individuals with ASD use special interest areas to understand the world.

13. *Inside the Mind of a Child with Autism*

http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/04/07/inside-the-mind-of-a-child-with-autism/?_r=0
In this article, New York Times science reporter Benedict Carey discusses therapies based on special interest areas, and research emerging from *Life, Animated*, the book.

14. *Just Give Him the Whale!: 20 Ways to Use Fascinations, Areas of Expertise, and Strengths to Support Students with Autism* (<https://amzn.com/1557669600>), Paula Kluth & Patrick Schwartz. A helpful guide with strategies for teachers and other educators to use students' interests, strengths, and talents into the classroom.

CONTRIBUTORS

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