

# Teaching Through Special Interests: Unlocking Learning for All Students

A practical guide by the Institute of Neurodiversity (ION)

## Why Special Interests Matter

For many children and young people, especially those of minority neurotypes, special interests are not distractions.

**They are lifelines.**

They offer safety, joy, focus, and identity in a world that often feels overwhelming.

When adults dismiss or ignore these interests, they risk severing the most reliable route into the child's world.

When we listen to them, honour them, and teach through them, we unlock trust, learning, and growth.

### Core Principle:

**If the activity is not meaningful to the child, they will not engage.**

**But if it is meaningful, especially when connected to a special interest, they will often exceed every expectation.**

## What Are Special Interests?

- Deep, focused areas of passion
- May seem unusual to others
- Can shift over time, or last for years
- Often carry emotional significance and regulate anxiety

- Common in autistic and other minority neurotype children, but meaningful to all

## How to Teach Through Special Interests

1.

### Start with Observation & Listening

- What do they talk about, draw, watch, or play?
- What lights them up, even when everything else shuts them down?

“He won’t engage in writing tasks.” → “He writes 12-page Pokémon battle scripts at home.”

Look for the real learning that’s already happening, just not in conventional formats.


2.


### Build Trust by Honouring Their World


- Mention their interest with curiosity and respect
- Let it shape how you connect, not just how you teach
- Don’t use it as a reward, use it as a bridge


3.

### Co-Create Learning Activities

 Into anime? → Create a storyboard for English

 Love Minecraft? → Explore geometry through world-building

 Obsessed with trains? → Chart train schedules in maths

 Fascinated by the brain? → Build a biology project around it

Let the interest be the medium, not just the hook.

4.

### **Embed Choice and Autonomy**

- Let them choose formats (poster, podcast, build, story)
- Involve them in planning
- Make space for them to go deep, don't rush breadth

5.

### **Plan Around the Interest, Not Just the Curriculum**

- You can still meet learning outcomes, but align them with how the child learns best
- Build project-based learning units that honour their preferred topics
- Use interests as emotional regulation tools before difficult transitions

## **School Avoidance + Special Interests**

For school-avoiding or anxious children, special interests are a safe space.

They are often the first, and sometimes only, route back into learning.

To ignore them is to ignore the child's core language of meaning.

## **What Educators Can Do**

Action	Impact
Acknowledge interests seriously	Builds trust and shows respect
Integrate them into planning	Increases motivation and engagement

Involve parents to reinforce at home

Builds consistency and partnership

Celebrate interest-based work publicly

Validates the child's identity

Avoid using them as reward/punishment

Keeps learning safe and non-conditional

## **Final Thought:**

**Every child wants to learn.**

But they need to feel safe, seen, and supported.

When we teach through what matters most to them, we stop asking,

**“How do we make them fit our system?”**

and start asking,

**“How can our system fit them?”**