

Strategies for Connecting With Your Growing Child (Molly Helt; added 2012)

I find that as my son gets older (he's now 13), he is much less engaged in many activities than he used to enjoy when he was younger. Like many parents of growing children on the spectrum, I know the frustration of wanting to keep him connected with a variety of interests at home but not quite knowing how. I've developed five strategies, none of them ideal, which I will share:

1. We plan our exciting weekend outings at the beginning of the week and put pictures of them on the calendar. Then every night we "talk" about what we'll do over the weekend. For example, we might look at our photos (or pictures online) of the activity. We might count how many sleeps there are till the activity and emphasize how excited we are. If the activity is a movie, we might think about what snacks we'll get, watch the trailer, etc.

When we finally do the special activity, we take pictures and short videos so that during the week we can relive any highlights: For example, "Matty do you remember when you forgot to take your socks off before the water slide? You don't go down a water slide with socks on! That is so silly!" The best way to get Matty's attention seems to be to remind him of the last time I had his attention!

2. We rotate the toys every couple of days so each toy only appears once in a blue moon. Once I saw that he got sick of so many favorites – e.g. marble run, music blocks, hot wheels, rocket balloons, bubbles, see and say, his slinky, all of his books - I wondered what would happen if these toys/books only appeared every few months. Sure enough, once I implemented this strategy, he did seem more interested in playing for a bit after school with whatever we happen to put out that day provided it had once been interesting to him and he hadn't seen it in a long time.

3. The one thing that really excites and motivates him is food. So I try to provide different food treats nearly every day – popcorn, or a lollipop, or chips and salsa, or cookies, etc. I try to stretch out the appeal of the treat by playing a game about it. For example, I will hide the treat somewhere, treasure hunt style, and then leave him a series of clues as to where to find it. Or we might play Hangman with the treat being the word(s) in question and he gains the treat when he guesses it. Sometimes I use the alphabet magnet fridge letters to spell out the name of the treat and scramble them so that he has to unscramble them to figure it out.

4. I oblige my son to do one unpreferred thing with me every day, which is my meager attempt to add new things to his repertoire. Most of these things never become preferred but over the years a few things that I have "made" him do have subsequently become preferred: Playing 'Winnie the Pooh' on his keyboard; drawing 'Winnie the Pooh' with one of those 'how to draw' books; a remote control airplane; and several computer games. And we've managed to have quite a bit of fun with some other imposed items that, while never becoming anything he would request, have added to his repertoire: e.g., the baking soda volcanoes; that fake snow you can make; getting lots of bowls and cups of water and food coloring and mixing colors, Nintendo Wii, Slip & Slide, floor puzzles, reading him those button sound books so that he has to follow along to press the buttons, etc.

5. We join the stims. My husband and my son will make crafts that go along with his stims. Yesterday they made the Teletubbies' Four Favorite Things. Last week they made Green Eggs and Ham. Not long ago they made the animals from the Brown Bear Book. He does stim with these things when they are done, but my husband figures at least he's got his attention while they are making them. Similarly I will sit with my son and imitate the electronic sounds the stimmy toys make or make funny motions with them. Sometimes he tells me angrily to go away but other times he starts to giggle and will press the button and then look up at me happily anticipating my imitation, making the stim a tiny bit more social.

I can't confidently recommend any of these strategies other than rotating the toys. We spend more money than we can afford on outings and I have wasted more money than I care to calculate (money that could have gone into his trust) on activities and toys for home that, despite my hopes, bombed terribly. He is overweight and certainly doesn't need so many treats, and I am sure that any behavioral therapist would scold us for encouraging the stimming in any way. I am sharing these ideas only because they are the best ways that I have found so far to help me feel connected to, and less lonely for, my child.