



## AUTISM CLASSROOM RESOURCES PODCAST, EPISODE 21 PERSEVERATION

URL: <http://autismclassroomresources.com/episode21>


Welcome back to the Autism Classroom Resources Podcast. I'm Chris Reeve and I have a special treat for you. I have pulled another episode from the vault of the [Special Educator Academy](#). This one comes from our Special Educator Academy Show podcast and it focuses on evidence based practices and ways you can implement them in your classroom. So this particular episode is about perseveration and how we can address it.

So when your students are getting stuck on specific topics or items that they may seem a little obsessed with or they just can't let it go, these are some strategies and some ideas to think about in how we can address that. In addition, I have two free downloads for you to use to address separation with your students and I'll tell you more about them at the end of the episode.

### What is the Special Educator Academy?

For those of you who are not familiar with it, the Special Educator Academy is a membership site for educators in any type of special education. It is appropriate for almost any type of special educator and it's where you'll find me in our community and tons and tons of strategies, training, and support across the board. So if you want to check it out you can find it as [specialeducatoracademy.com](http://specialeducatoracademy.com). On with the SEAShow.

### The Impact of Perseveration



Many of our students have difficulty getting stuck on topics or objects or seeming obsessed with things. And it is one of often the most irritating things that they do. It's very interesting. There was a study back in the 1990s that asked families of students with severe challenging behaviors what were the biggest problems. And the biggest problems were actually identified as being things like if he sings Wheels on the Bus one more time, I'm going to jump out a window, as opposed to headbanging or other things. And the researchers attributed it to the fact that people help them with the severe behavior, but they did not give them that support for those behaviors that just over time. They just nag you to death.

So if you've ever met a student who only wants to talk about Toy Story or who can only talk about the circus or fans or vacuum cleaners or something that happened two years ago, then you have met a student who perseverates. If you have met a student who can't change a topic and can only talk about their topics and their interest, then you've probably met a student who perseverates.

We do see it more in our students with autism, but we also do see it with other disabilities. And of course we have a number of students who don't have an autism diagnosis, who have a lot of autism characteristics. So I want to talk first about the fact that we can look at the perseverations and the functions that they serve. And then I'll talk a little bit about some strategies that you can use to address them. So let's get started.

## Functions of Perseveration

You won't be surprised to hear me say that perseveration is just like any other behavior and we have to figure out what the function of that behavior is. And the function for perseveration can be varied. And obviously it's going to depend on the student.



## Attention as a Function of Perseveration

But one is to gain attention. Imagine that you were in a remote place in Italy and you didn't speak Italian. You've been there for a month, you haven't been able to talk to anybody and you might want to have somebody to engage in conversation. And so maybe the only thing you know how to say is, "What's for dinner?" So you always ask that question and people always respond to you. If your, if your communication skills are that limited, it's likely you're going to repeat that frequently because it gets people to respond to you. So a lot of times we see the behaviors that our students do are just not appropriate to the situation, but they're not that different than other human behaviors.

If you're a student with limited communication and social skills, then that scenario might be part of your everyday life. You have learned over time that asking questions, for instance, will get people to respond and it gets you attention. Repeating something from a movie or a video game or part of a conversation are things that people typically will respond to.

## Interest in the Topic or Lack of Other Topics

It may be that talking about the topic itself is reinforcing. So it might be that they really, really like to talk about their topics. We all like to talk about our topics. Sometimes you just, really want to talk about something that you really like, you know, you read and we do it in an inappropriate way. We chat on Facebook with teacher friends. Maybe you really like teaching and so you read a lot of teaching blogs or here in our community talking about teaching or he you saw an amazing movie and you just really want to tell somebody about it.



## Perseveration Happens to All of Us: The Role of Social Awareness


Again, the difference is that how that skill is used. Because for a lot of our students, they will engage in those behaviors with people they don't know. Rather than I know to call my sister who has a particular interest in teaching. Or I know to go in our community and talk about it there. Or you know, I know that there are people that I can talk to about those specific topics and that there are people who don't want to hear about it because I'm social, a good social problem solver most of the time. So if I don't have good social problem solving skills, I'm also not going to notice that the person that I'm talking to is just really over this topic. So I don't know when to stop. So sometimes we see individuals get stuck on that topic because that topic is reinforcing.

Or they don't have anything else to talk about so they can only talk about that. They don't have any more content. Is kind of how we refer to it.

## Perseveration & Anxiety

And then sometimes the perseveration is built out of an anxiety. Sometimes there's an automatic reinforcement.

And my biggest, if you've see me train before, you've probably heard this example, but my biggest example for us is if you recently went to the doctor. And she ran some tests to see if the headaches that you were having were something serious and she tells you that she'll call when she has the results. And of course you're a teacher and your cell phone doesn't work in your classroom. And it's 4:30 on Friday by the time you get out of the building. And at five o'clock there's a message from the doctor on your



phone. When you check it, she says to call her because the test results are back.

But of course her office is closed and she won't be back until Monday. And that may make you feel a little bit anxious. In my family, if you have a headache, my mother thought you had a brain tumor. So you know, that was always in the back of your head. So that anxiety might drive me to call my sister and talk about what are the options of what they could be. And my sister listens because she's kind to me and she knows that it's bothering me. But the difference is that I would know when my sister really can't talk about it anymore and it's just over it. And we'll shift to a different listener. So then I'll call a friend or I'll call someone else.

So I'm still anxious. Even though they're tired of hearing about it, my anxiety still hasn't been dealt with. So talking about it makes my anxiety less. But when I stopped talking about it, the anxiety grows again. So at that point, the anxiety is the underlying element of my obsessive talking about these doctor's tests. Again, an appropriate situation that may not be the same for, for other people.

My sister who has autism, we often see this behavior and we'll see my sister talk about things over and over that we can't solve. And you know, we always kind of say, when is she gonna stop? And you know, we've, we've given her all the answers that we have. When is she gonna stop? But she's not going to stop until she's going to until she stops. Because the anxiety is what's driving this conversation.

So if we don't address the anxiety, we're not going to see a change in that perseveration. We might see a shift of the way that it presents itself. But if there is an automatic reinforcement that it relieves, a feeling of anxiety, we're going to have to teach them ways to calm down and cope with that anxiety in order to make that behavior decrease.



## Basing Intervention on the Function of Perseveration

So knowing the function is going to play a big role in how we address the behavior. We have to know why it's happening so that we really get at the underlying problem behind it. So we need to look at teaching them to calm down, teaching them to think about something else, teaching them to think about distracting thoughts. Those are all things that can't happen when the anxiety is present. By the way, those are all things that need to happen before the anxiety hits. So I will do another podcast on anxiety. It's all my upcoming list where I'll talk more about those strategies. But it is very important when we think about perseveration that we think about why it's happening. If it is coming from anxiety limits that we put on it are going to be more problematic. If it's coming from I need attention. There are other things that we can do.


## How Do I Stop Perseveration?

So let's talk next about what we can do about perseveration. I'm not gonna focus as much on the one with anxiety, with the function of anxiety, primarily because it's a much bigger conversation.

### Teach Ways to Gain Attention

But there are some things that we can do if we have a student who's engaging in the behavior to get attention and get you to talk to them. Certainly then we need to teach them better ways to get that attention.

### Increase Topics They Can Discuss



If they only have one topic to talk about, we can teach them different topics so that they're not stuck on one topic. And then there are also some things that we can do if they are stuck on an object or something that they have to have with them because perseveration can be verbal but it can also be object based. You can also be obsessed with an object.

## Ignore the Perseveration


So the first is if we're dealing with it, with an attention seeking behavior, we can ignore the statement if you've already responded to it once. And of course then we run into the problem that we talked about in a previous podcast that maybe ignoring is not the best solution and I'll put that link underneath the in the show notes for you, [this is in the Academy only]. But we can definitely say, you know, I hear it and then I don't respond. If you're superhuman and you can do that, that's a great strategy. Chances are good that it keeps happening because you can't do that.

## Use Visuals to Redirect

The other is to redirect them with a visual to talk about something else or to use a relaxation strategy. So we can, if it is anxiety and they do have some strategies, we can cue them to use them. If they are stuck on one topic, we can cue them to talk about something else.

Try using a visual to tell them. You know, if you've got a kid who only wants to talk about Toy Story, show them a visual that says talk about another movie or I want to talk about something else. So you're giving a very clear visual social cue to change the subject.

I use visuals because it keeps you from attending to the behavior verbally and the individual can't argue with the visuals. So you don't run into the problem of, "I don't want to talk about that." Think of it as a polite way to



make your eye-rolling or other more subtle facial expression that you've used 15 times that you've talked about Minecraft today more clear.

It's just a way of making those social cues that we're using it more salient for this individual. You're giving information about what they should do. You can write it out. You can use a picture, but something that you can give them and either move away or wait or leave if they're continuing to perseveration.

## Redirect to Designated Time

You can also direct the student to his or her schedule with a time that he could talk about something. So again, we all have topics that we really want to talk about and the difference is we know who and when to talk about those things. So maybe we teach them that there is a time that you can talk about this or there is a person that you can talk about this. So schedule a time, put it on their schedule and then when they start to talk about it, "When can we talk about Minecraft? Check your schedule." Or "We have to wait for pack up time to talk about that."

I had a teacher that I worked with who had a group of students who always talked about electrical wires and for some reason it was a perseveration that caught throughout the entire classroom. So at the end of the day, if they could all stay on other topics, she would give them five minutes where they could all talk to each other about electrical wires and she would write her own notes. So rather than fighting it, she found a way to make it work for them.

We can also set limits in a very concrete way. So this is probably my favorite way is to use a timer. Maybe he has five minutes to talk about something. Much like the one with the power lines I was talking about.





## Use Lists for Self-Monitoring


If you have a student who likes to check things off of lists. I had a girl once that I met who loved to talk about the circus. And you know, if I go up and I talk to somebody and they're not interested or I've already talked about it, I need to find someone else to talk about it with. So she really loved lists and she liked checking things off. So we gave her list of all the people that she interacted with during the day. And she would then go up to them and if she had already talked about the circus with them, they would say, check your list.

And she had a note on the bottom that says, you know, if I've crossed this person off after she talked to them the first time, then I can talk about something else or talk to another person. Because those are really the choices that we make. And she loved the list. So that worked really well for her.

## Use Tickets to Set Limits

I've had other students that we give tickets to. When we give them a set of tickets with a number of times that they can talk about a favorite topic. So the best way to do these types of things is to figure out how many times is he talking to you about this topic. Then make that number of tickets slightly lower than that. Don't go from, he talks about it a hundred times a day to I want him to talk about it zero. Maybe we start with 30 times a day or 50 times a day.

So he has five tickets to talk about movies and every time he talks about it he has to give it up. And if he can't give me a ticket because he ran out, then the cue is talk about something else or sometimes find somebody else to talk to, just depending.



So those are some ways that you can set limits that let them know it's okay to talk about this, but talk about it fewer times or talk about it with different people. Spread it out a little bit or tone it down a little bit are ways that we can teach them, but they're going to need very concrete cues of how many times they've done it and how many times they should do it.

Those are some ways that we can address that. Clearly if the student is engaging in this behavior to gain attention, we need to simultaneously work on teaching better ways to gain attention, better conversational skills, other ways that he can get someone's attention than asking a question.


Questions are one that come up a lot because people respond to questions. So teaching him to call out your name or show off something that he's done are ways that typical kids will get attention. So those are ways that you can manage that verbal perseveration when they get stuck.

## Addressing Object Perseveration

A way to handle that object perseveration. If you've ever had a student who had to always have a certain thing with him, wherever he went, kind of like Linus, his blanket in Peanuts. He always has to have that thing with him. And obviously sometimes that's okay, but sometimes that's not appropriate. So how do we get him away from that?

So I had a kid who always had this very sweaty, sticky handful of coins wherever he went and his teacher was like, he's never, he never gives him up. And he holds him in both hands so he can't do anything when he's with you. He can't do anything instructionally cause he always has to hold on to these.

What's amazing is that sometimes if you give them what we call a parking place, so we give them a box or something to put things in, that becomes something that they can then park it in. But the key is that they have to



know they're getting it back. So it's not "Go put it in your backpack," it's "Put it in the parking lot while we're working and then you get it back." And I'll use it as a reinforcer because you know, if you're a kid with autism, never tell anybody what you like because we'll, you will take it away, make it a reinforcer.

So this kid, I sat down and got a box and I set it down and I said park. And the first time I pried the sticky gross coins out of his hand into the box, I asked him a simple question he could answer and immediately let him access the coins again. He immediately got it. All I had to say was park or park them and he would park his coins, he'd do the task and then he picked them up again. So it's just a way to kind of keep them so that they know I'm going to get it. I can see them. You haven't taken them away from me.

Because a lot of times we take these things away cause we're just like, we can't have that anymore. And then if it's something that reduces their anxiety, their anxiety skyrockets. So think about a way that he can still see it.

## Use a Timer or Put it On His Schedule

Maybe there's a timer on it before he can have it again. Maybe there are certain times of day. This is another one. You could put it on his schedule when he can access this. You can have this at this time, but not this time. But start with something clear and short that he can still see it. He knows that he's going to get it back. He's used to the routine. And you teach them that before you start taking it away and telling him to use it as a certain time of day. So, and it's an important thing because it gets in the way of social interactions, working, all sorts of things.




## Summary

So those are some ways that you can address it when they've got that object obsession that they have to have. That's a way that you can kind of set limits and let them know you can have it. Could we take it away and make them go cold turkey? Probably. Would it probably end up escalating to a point where we would have to reinforce it. Probably. So better to take it in small doses and shape it down than to try to do an all or nothing kind of situation.

So those are just some ways that you can deal with perseveration. Remember that you really want to make sure you look at the function in the same way that we do for any behavior. We'll do a functional behavior assessment on it. We'll look at how people are responding in their environment. What types of situations seem to make it happen more frequently and then plan for that. So we're teaching replacement skills. But then we can also some consequence skills where we're setting some limits depending on the function itself. So we always want to make those interventions match the functions.

I hope you enjoyed that podcast from the Academy vault. If you have interesting perseveration stories or questions about perseveration, hop over to our free Facebook group at [specialeducatorsconnection.com](https://www.facebook.com/specialeducatorsconnection) and definitely share them there as well as hop over to [autismclassroomresources.com/episode21](https://autismclassroomresources.com/episode21) and there is a freebie waiting for you as long as, as well as a transcript if you'd like it in the blog post to help you address perseveration with your students.

So there are some tickets that you can use that are both picture based and written. One of them you can even edit to the topics that you need it to be. So hopefully they'll help you get started with addressing the things that



drive you crazy that your students are stuck on. Thank you so much for taking the time to tune in today. I hope that you will join us again for another episode of the Autism Classroom Resources Podcast next week.