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Development of a questionnaire on strengths and interests in autism.

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Autistic children's intense interests (e.g.: numbers, letters, dinosaurs, cars, falling objects) make up a significant part of their everyday lives. The importance of these interests has been a subject of debate. Recent studies show that intense interests in autism are associated with wellbeing and the development of different abilities. Documenting these interests, along with their associated strengths, is typically done with the help of parents. However, until recently, no standardized measure could reliably document and assess the development of special strengths and interests in autistic children.

To address this gap, the Questionnaire on Autistic Preschoolers' Strengths and Interests (QAPSI) was developed. As an initial step, a review of existing research articles on strengths and interests of autistic and typical children was conducted. This led to the development of a preliminary version of the questionnaire. Then, professional experts in autism and parents of young

children with autism reviewed the questionnaire, with a back-and-forth revision process. Including both professionals and parents in this process is important and considered essential for the development of an assessment measure meant for parents of autistic children. Their collaboration allows the integration of both professional and experiential knowledge in the development of a specialized measure that is well adapted to its users.

This new questionnaire is easily completed as it includes 19 questions and takes from 20 to 30 minutes to fill out. The QAPSI documents children's as well as parents' strengths and interests. This questionnaire has closed-ended questions, to which parents can answer with a Likert-type scale (i.e.: from "no interest" to "intense interest"; or from "do not agree at all" to "completely agree") and open-ended questions allowing for details and additional information concerning main interests, for example.



The questionnaire's final version was pilot-tested with 27 parents of young autistic children and 28 parents of typical children aged 2 to 6 years. Parents from both groups confirmed the questionnaire's value and relevance. By rating their children's abilities and their own, parents also enjoyed realizing how many strengths they shared. Generally, parents of autistic children rated their children's strengths and interests less positively compared to parents of typical children. Yet, parents of autistic children also expressed their desire to embrace autistic interests and strengths. For example, one parent mentioned: **"the questionnaire allowed me to see things other than my children's deficits"**.


Additionally, the questionnaire highlighted important differences between the two groups of children. Unsurprisingly, autistic children's interests were rated as being more intense compared to typical children's interests. Five interest domains were significantly more frequent in autistic children: 1) logos; 2) numbers; 3) letters; 4) electronics; 5) pipes, whereas the following three domains were more popular with typical children: 1) playing with friends; 2) make-believe play; 3) reading books.

Parents from 10 different autistic children reported literacy (letters/numbers/books) as being their child's main interest, 8 reported electronic devices, 2 dolls/plushies, and others reported interests in other objects or activities such as watching television, dinosaurs, coloring books, water, cars, Legos or fans. Parents also reported that their autistic child's interest for literacy

was used to recognize, write, copy or identify different letters and numbers. Letters were used for observing books and numbers were placed in ascending or descending order or were used to count: "She can count up to 100 in French, English, and Romanian. She memorizes words and can recognize them.". Results also show that interests tend to intensify and diversity with time, as children grow older: "His interest in numbers has intensified. He writes them, draws them, groups them, places them, makes constructions and tells stories with numbers. He is very creative"; "His interest in letters and numbers has grown and he has gotten even better.". These results indicate that these children's growing interest in literacy has led them to develop new knowledge and skills. Future intervention strategies could be developed around children's interests and eventually promote the development of abilities.

Three strengths were significantly more common in children with autism: shapes, embedded games or toys, and playing around with a screen. For example, when talking about construction blocks, a parent mentioned: "My child stacks them together in a line but in a complex manner. For example, piles become larger, and he can make more columns.". Another parent commented about his child's strengths: "He uses magnetic letters, but he also uses letters made out of wood, foam, plastic, he can also make words and associations...he uses anything he sees in his environment."

To summarize, the findings show how important it is to take into account the strengths and interests of autistic children. Ultimately, this questionnaire will allow parents to identify and assess their child's strengths and interests and will help researchers understand how strengths and interests are connected. Moreover, this questionnaire promotes the inclusion of parents in their child's evaluation process, by encouraging professionals and parents to collaborate.

Being the first instrument that will allow us to document autistic children's strengths and interests from their parents' perspective, the QAPSI could bring forward a better understanding of these autistic traits, and of the way these contribute to learning and the development of new abilities in some cases. With the QAPSI, a detailed individualized profile of strengths and interests will go hand in hand with promoting new interventions that are tailored specifically to every child. This assessment can also prove useful for parents, who will be able to use these strengths and interest profiles to apply new techniques or adapt home routines. Using the strength and interest profile and integrating it to daily living could foster a good quality of life for the entire family and greater sense of wellbeing. 



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