

“Just Give Him the Whale”:

Using Passions, Areas of Expertise, & Strengths
to Support Students with Autism

Paula Kluth, Ph.D.

paula.kluth@gmail.com

website: www.paulakluth.com

 Facebook Page: “Paula Kluth”

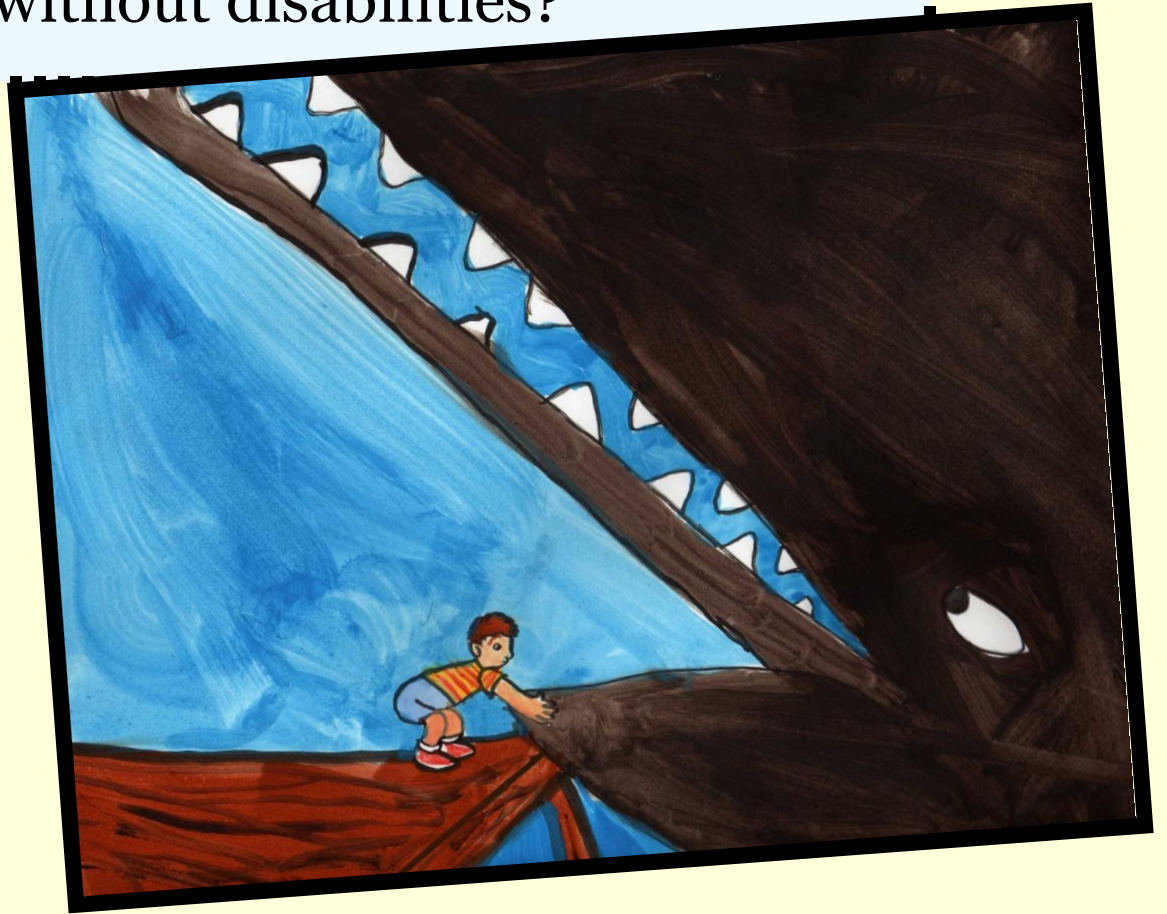
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“Just Give Him the Whale”

What does Pedro’s story mean for teachers? For parents? For other students without autism? For students without disabilities?



What is autism?

The medical model

AUTISM

- Qualitative impairment in social interaction
- Qualitative impairment in communication
- Restricted repetitive and stereotyped patterns of behavior, interests, and activities



What story are we telling about autism? Is it accurate? Useful? Who is telling the story?

What do we mean by “obsession” or fascination?

- Facts/verbal memory & learning (facts about Civil War)
- Facts/visual memory & learning (designing skyscrapers out of Legos)
- Sensory behaviors (running fingers through water)
- Math (appreciation of certain shapes, solving problems)
- Classifying/ordering information (organizing record collection by colors or by year of release)
- Dates & times (studying clocks, keeping track of birthdays)
- Collecting (picking up & saving rubber bands, buying every Thomas toy)
- Letters & numbers: (spelling words, making number sentences out of digits on license plates)

Klin et al. (2007). Circumscribed interests in HF individuals with ASD:
An exploratory study. *JASH*.

What do we mean by “obsession” or fascination?

Is this the same as the obsessions experienced by those with OCD?

No. In OCD, obsessions are characterized by fear & discomfort. In autism, obsessions are typically valued and experienced in a positive way.

Baron-Cohen, S. (1989). Do autistic children have obsessions & compulsions? *British Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 28, 193-200.

Klin et al. (2007). Circumscribed interests in HF individuals with ASD: An exploratory study. *JASH*.

What do we mean by “obsession” or fascination?

We see student fascinations that fall into three categories:

1. Common & age-appropriate fascinations: video games, pop stars, musicals, dolls, action figures, dinosaurs
2. Sophisticated fascinations (unexpected for a person his or her age): surgical techniques, the economy
3. Uncommon fascinations: mustard bottles, elevator doors

trains

American Idol

GEORGE WASHINGTON

legal cases

Bob Barker

paper clips

ABBA

Route 66

I have a question for teenagers here.

Q: When is an obsession not an obsession?

A. When it is about football.



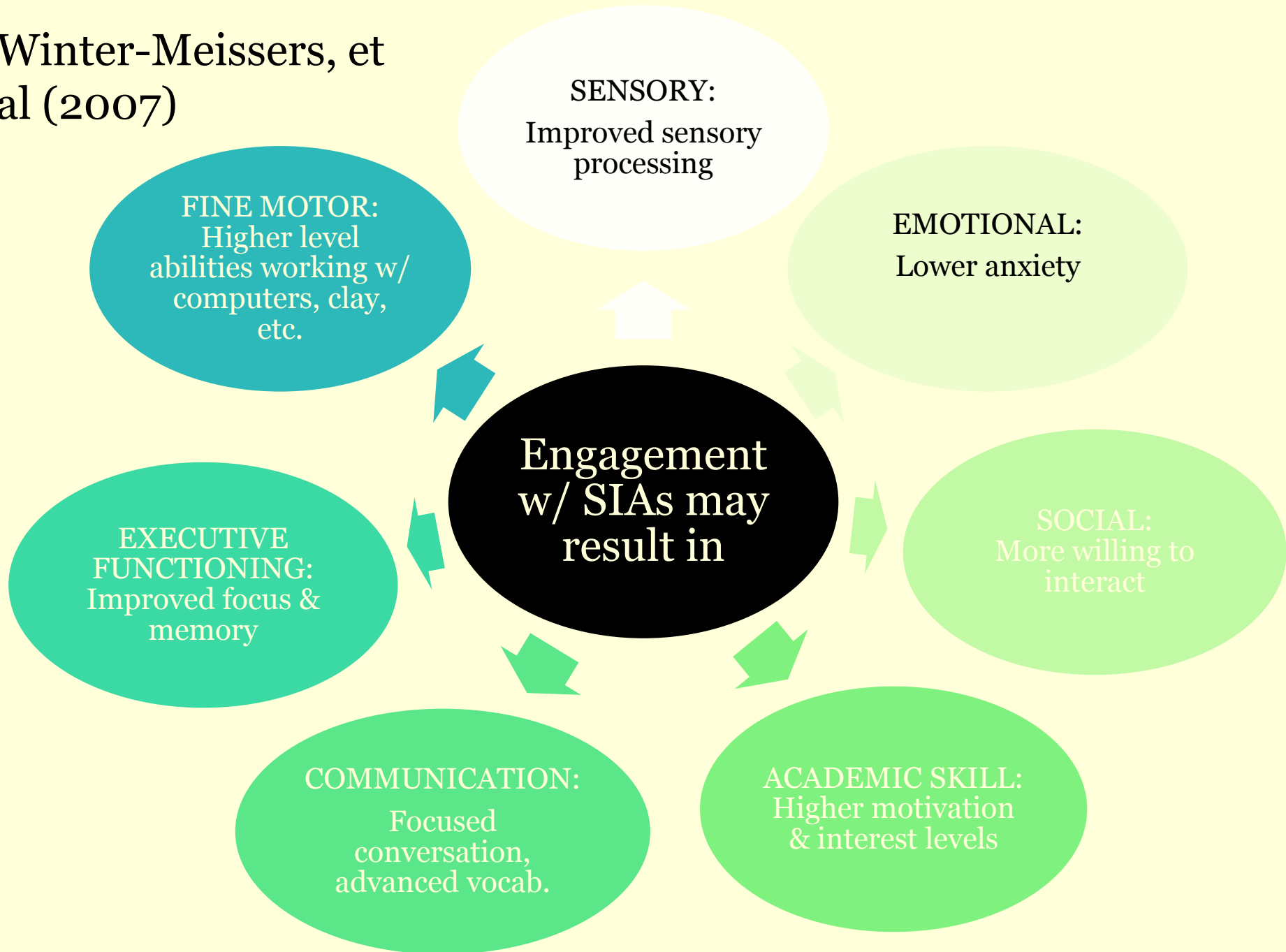
How unfair is that? It seems that our society fully accepts the fact that a lot of men and boys eat, sleep, and breathe football and people seem to think that if someone doesn't, then they are not fully male. Stupid! (p. 47)

Jackson, L. (2002). *Freaks, geeks, and Asperger syndrome*. Jessica Kingsley.

Willey, L. H. (2001). *Asperger Syndrome in the Family Redefining Normal: Redefining Normal*. Jessica Kingsley.

At the base, I have to wonder, are we so very different from marathon athletes, corporate presidents, bird watchers, or new parents counting every breath their newborn takes?obsessions, in and out of themselves are not bad habits. There is much good about them. Obsessions take focus and tenacious study. They are the stuff greatness needs. I have to believe the best of the remarkable – the artists, musicians, philosophers, scientists, writers, researchers and athletes—had to obsess on their chosen fields or they would never had become great. (p. 122)

Winter-Meissers, et al (2007)



What are YOUR passions,
fascinations, rituals, &
“isms”?



It's not about "giving in"
it's about providing a way to get
from here to there.



Use Fascinations &
Strengths...



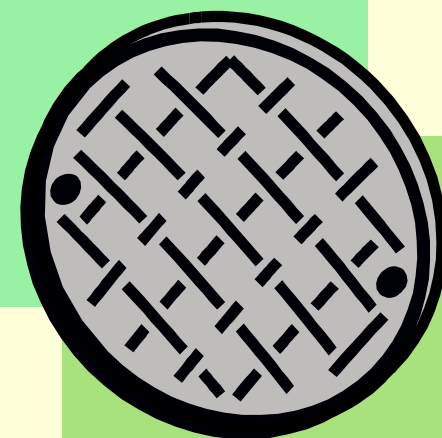
To Expand Social Opportunities

Use things the autistic individual enjoys to spark her interest. If she likes music and hums to herself, use music as an introduction to relating to other people. It is a falsehood that autistics do not relate. Rather, they relate in their own ways.

(O' Neill, p. 83)

Winter-Messiers (2007) found that the individuals with autism changed dramatically when invited to chat about interests:

- the intelligibility of the participants increased markedly,
- as did the sophistication of their use of vocabulary, word order, and syntax



To Inspire Learning & Facilitate Inclusion



- plan curriculum
- plan instruction
- create opportunities for participation & success

Emeril as Inclusion Facilitator

- “Today’s Menu”
- Chef’s hat & “bam”
- Desk Emeril
- Cooking-related lessons
- Pampered chef-inspired writing supports



Cursive writing is
cool!

Match Game

The teacher needs two groups of cards (A & B); each card in one group (A) must have a matching card in the other group (B).

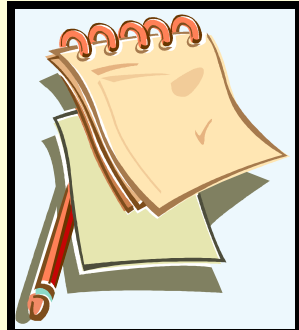
The teacher distributes a card to every student in the class.

Every student is given one index card and told to walk around the room, talking to other students and comparing their cards.

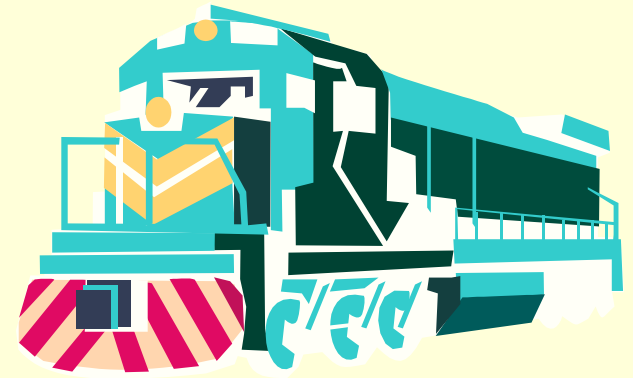
Once students have found the card and the individual who matches their card, they should sit down next to that person and wait for others to find their matches.

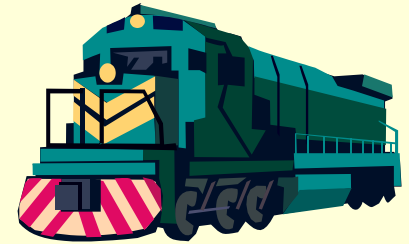
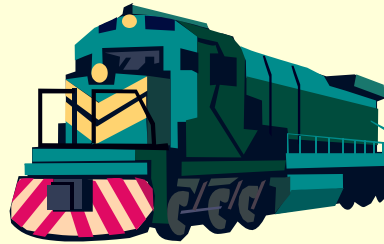
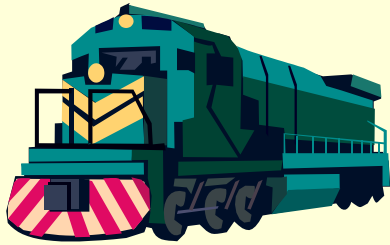
Udvari-Solner & Kluth (2007). *Joyful learning*. Corwin Press.

Ideal for vocabulary practice!



- One teacher used *Match Game* to showcase the talents of one of her students, Marn.
- One card, for instance, had the phrase, “run-through” written on it. The definition of run-through which is “a train that generally is not scheduled to pick up or reduce (set out) railcars enroute” was written on another card. Students had to find matches for terms and phrases that were, in most cases, completely new to them.





- How can favorites be featured in lessons?
Look for links in advance (e.g., doing the calendar)
- GOOGLE searches (e.g., multiplication and Ferris wheels; Ferris wheels and poems)
- How can the standards be adapted to intersect with fascinations? (Explain the US relationship to other nations and its role in international organizations)

To Create & Select Literacy Materials



*Keep in mind materials beyond books and magazines (e.g., catalogs, pamphlets, On Star manual)

*Try a different format (e.g., cereal boxes, rolodexes, posters)

“Whaling” the pencil box

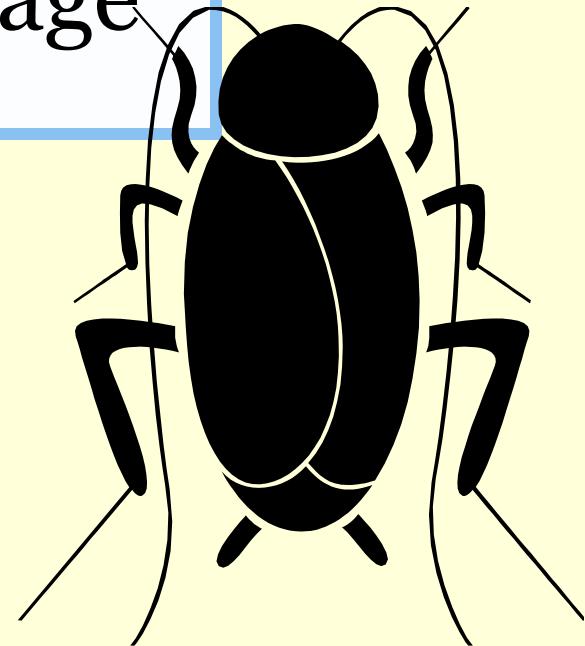
In addition to pens, pencils, crayons, markers, chalk, stickers,
& stencils.....

- scrabble tiles (for a lover of games)
- typewriter or label maker (for someone who likes machines or gadgets)
- old lipsticks (for the princess or glamour fan)
- paint brushes (for the artist)
- potato stamps (for a foodie)
- magic “decoder” pen/inks (for the spy/James Bond fanatic)
- sand [tracing letters/words in a bin or pan] (for a beach lover)



To Address Challenges

- Avoid using favorites only as rewards...use them as tools for including & supporting
- Use them to calm & encourage



POWER Cards

(Elise Gagnon)

**You win some,
you lose
some!**

1. Smile and put out your right hand and shake the other person's right hand.
2. Introduce yourself and ask the person how they are.
3. Practice greetings with your friends and teachers.



Strengths & Strategies Pages



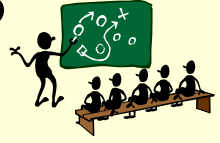
Gifts, Strengths, Talents, Interests: TARA

- Loves the Jonas Brothers & knows many of the lyrics to songs
- Can read her portfolio book independently
- Likes to talk in the author's chair
- Plays with High School Music dolls and creates stories with the characters
- Exceptional memory- knows friends and staff members
- Knows how to play 4 computer games on her own-3 from Starfall
- Likes to look at magazines- especially American Girl magazine
- Loves her class job of organizing the library kiosk
- Enjoys "playing" games like Boggle & Scrabble Jr
- Interested in plants and growing things
- Loves watching Antiques Road Show with mom
- Very interested in the globe (loves to spin it)- has the Leap Frog globe at home and can identify several locations including most continents and some countries (Madagascar, Mexico)
- Likes the concept of "sets" and "subsets" and likes to create these with manipulatives
- Knows how to add with a calculator
- Knows left from right
- Can navigate the upper unit on her own
- Can and will get her iPod when she feels upset/stressed
- Knows how to use her CD player
- Likes to color with black crayon/black marker
- Loves using any stencils and likes making stencils
- Drawing is an interest- likes to put letters (alphabet) into her drawings

<http://www.paulakluth.com/articles/strengthstrateg.html> for a blank template of this tool and an article about uses

Strengths & Strategies Pages

Things That Work: TARA

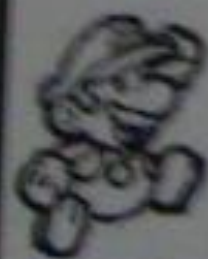


- showing as well as telling (illustrate, sign language, written words)
- telling her the mantra, “this too shall pass”
- letting her review her “recess choice” book before going on the playground
- having her start the day by looking at her CD covers
- give her CD covers when she is stressed
- do a lot of previewing for her– let her know what is coming next
- let her sit next to Jess, Em, Reg, or Lara – it is very motivating for her
- give her red school supplies- esp. notebook
- she likes sitting on the loveseat for SSR or guided reading
- letting her “read” more than one book at a time, she likes to spread them out and review two at once
- allowing her to write or draw on the chalk board
- let her work on Starfall.com in spare time
- give her opportunities to help other kids (she likes to organize desks)
- ask her to help with organizing things in the classroom (e.g., straighten library books)- she loves it
- show her how instead of telling her (act out the thing she needs to do)
- give her opportunities to share her portfolio
- sometimes likes to know exactly where her work space is (you can tape it off to show her)
- may need to take little “safe spot” or relaxation breaks
- use Jonas Brothers to interest her in activities- for instance, let her write stories about them
- using photographs to interact with her (have students bring photos to show her and let her show her photos to others)
- letting her help to teach a part of a lesson (she likes to help the teacher)

To Create the Perfect Learning Environment

- seating (e.g., Oprah set)
- props (e.g., microphone, puppet, Wheel of Fortune spinner)
- language (e.g., “complete your mission”)
- auditory cues & supports (e.g., transition with train whistle, have Diego read books on tape)





First



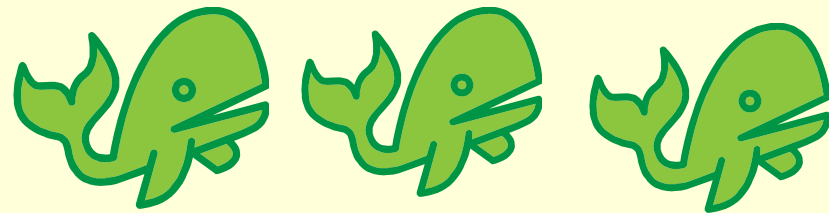
Next



Then

Keep in mind....

You don't have to understand someone's passion in order to honor it!



So, honor, support, listen, and....

and....

“Just Give Him the Whale”

