

# The Power Card Strategy

By Brenda Smith Myles, PhD

Many people have special interests – hobbies or areas of expertise from which they derive pleasure, stress-relief, or distraction. While important for the neuromajority,<sup>1</sup> special interests hold special significance for autistics who report that the world makes more sense with special interests, which they then feel a greater sense of confidence and positivity when engaged with their special interests.

## Positive Outcomes for Autistics When Special Interests are Incorporated into Learning and Behavior Activities

|                      |                       |
|----------------------|-----------------------|
| Academic achievement | Motivation            |
| Communication        | Perspective taking    |
| Conversation         | Pretend play          |
| Correct responses    | Reading comprehension |
| Decreased anxiety    | Self-confidence       |
| Decreased regulation | Social interaction    |
| Direction following  | Sportsmanship         |
| Joint attention      | Visual exploration    |
| Language development |                       |

References can be found in Gagnon, E., & Myles, B. S. (2016). *The Power Card Strategy 2.0: Using special interests to motivate children and youth with autism spectrum disorder*. Shawnee Mission, KS: AAPC Publishing.

*"Between 75% and 90% of autistics develop deep and intense interests as compared to 30% of their neuromajority counterparts. They may occur as early as 1-to-2 years of age and last throughout the lifespan, often increasing in adulthood. Autistic adults report that they spend an average of 26 hours weekly on their special interests."*



Recognizing the impact of special interests, Elisa Gagnon (2001) created the Power Card Strategy.<sup>2</sup> This strategy meets the criteria for evidence-based practices as an antecedent intervention, and several studies have been published on this intervention.

The Power Card Strategy can support the use of social skills, academic behaviors, and self-calming strategies – just to name a few. If you think that a particular “behavior” would be best supported using an individual’s special interest, the first step is to identify a hero associated with the special interest.

If the student likes...

- Photocopy machines, the hero could be a photocopy repair person or the inventor of the photocopy machine;
- Dinosaurs, the hero could be Barney™ if for a younger individual or a paleontologist for an older individual;
- Trucks, so the hero could be Mater in the Cars movie for a younger individual or Gottlieb Daimler, pickup truck inventor, for an older individual.

Why identify a hero? In some way, we all want to be like our heroes. We might even buy clothing that represents them! The special interest hero serves several purposes for the autistic:

- Few things are more motivating than a special interest;
- Using the special interest is nonthreatening. It is often easier to buy into this sort of scenario than a top-down command;
- Since a child wants to be like his hero, he is more likely to do what the hero suggests.

After identifying the hero, a short scenario is written in the first person at the individual’s comprehension



level to introduce the hero. The scenario consists of two parts. In the first paragraph, the hero (a) describes the problem, (b) uses a strategy to solve it, and (c) experiences success. The second paragraph encourages the individual to try the new strategy which is detailed in manageable steps. The scenario can be written on a single sheet or in booklet form.

The Power Card is then created. The size of a trading card or business card, the Power Card recaps how the learner can use the same strategy to solve a similar problem. Often a picture of the special interest is included. The Power Card can be carried in a purse, wallet, or pocket; it can be Velcroed™ inside a notebook or locker, placed on the corner of a student’s desk. or presented on a smartphone or tablet.

### **A Power Card Example**

Nine-year-old Gary was enthusiastic about answering every question the teacher asked, whether it was directed at him. He often blurted a response or interrupted others who were trying to respond to the teacher.

Gary’s special interest was Angry Birds. The following scenario was developed based on Gary’s special interest and the behavior: difficulty waiting his turn (see Figure 2). In the first paragraph, Gary learns that for his heroes to be part of the team, they had to learn how to answer questions. The second paragraph encourages Gary to try to answer questions using the Angry Birds’ four steps. Gary was encouraged to practice the new behavior several times and was verbally praised for “answering questions just like the Angry Birds’ Team.”

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The Angry Birds follow these 4 steps to answer questions:



1. Listen to the question.
2. Think to yourself, "Do I have an answer?"
3. If you have an answer, raise your hand. Don't speak unless the teacher calls your name.
4. If the teacher calls on you, answer the question.

Figure 1. Gary's Power Card Scenario.

### ***The Angry Birds Learn to Wait Their Turn***

*Before they can join the Angry Birds, the birds had to attend school and learn how to be part of the team. The red bird had a particularly hard time learning to wait his turn. He wanted to answer all of the questions. When the teacher asked the group a question, he sometimes shouted out the answer without raising his hand. The blue bird, the white bird, and the black bird often became upset that the red bird was not following the classroom rule about waiting his turn.*

*The Angry Birds' teacher taught the red bird these four steps:*

1. Listen to the question.
2. Think to yourself, "Do I have an answer?"
3. If you have an answer, raise your hand. Don't speak unless the teacher calls your name.
4. If the teacher calls on you, answer the question.

*Just like the red bird, you can be part of the Angry Birds' team. Being a part of the team will make all of the Angry Birds happy. They will be happy that you are on their team!*

After Gary was introduced to the scenario, he was given the Power Card (see Figure 2). The size of a business card, the Power Card consists of a picture related to the Angry Birds and the steps that Gary needs to remember when answering questions.

The Power Card strategy is a positive

intervention that may help autistics learn more comfortably and effectively. By using a special interest, the individual is motivated to use Power Card Strategy. This relatively simple strategy can

make a meaningful difference in the lives of many autistics and those who teach them and love them.



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Champion, and two-time recipient of the Council for Exceptional Children Burton Blatt Humanitarian Award. She served as the editor of the journal *Intervention in School and Clinic* and has been a member of the editorial board of several journals. Brenda has made over 3000 presentations all over the world and written more than 300 articles and books on ASD. She also collaborated with the three organizations who identified evidenced based practices in autism. In the latest survey conducted by the University of Texas, she was acknowledged as the second most productive applied researcher in ASD in the world.

### **REFERENCES**

Gagnon, E. (2001). Power cards: Using special interests to motivate children and youth with Asperger Syndrome and autism. Shawnee Mission, KS: AAPC Publishing.

1 The term "neuromajority" is used in this article instead of the often-used term "neurotypical" as there is nothing typical about people known as neurotypicals. There just seems to be more of them - hence the term "neuromajority". Thanks to Judy Endow for sharing this wisdom with me.

2 The author of this article was honored to write the 2nd edition with Elisa Gagon.



# Creating a Power eCard in the Digital Age

By Lois Jean Brady



In today's digital age, traditional paper-based Power Cards have evolved into their electronic counterparts, finding a natural home on smartphones and tablets. This transformation harnesses the convenience and versatility of digital devices, offering new and efficient ways to assist individuals in various aspects of their lives.

Using the example of nine-year-old Gary and his special interest, Angry Birds we will explore the exciting process of crafting a **speaking** Power eCard, using InnerVoice app, that features your hero character offering personalized and engaging assistance.

Other excellent app choices are talking photo albums like *Click n' Talk*, a book creation app such as *Book Creator* or have some fun with comics strips with *Strip Designer*.

Here is how to get started with InnerVoice --

## 1. Launch InnerVoice and Create a New Hero Talking Avatar:

- Initiate the creation of a talking avatar for the hero and establish a folder with buttons to narrate the scenario.

## 2. Design Your Hero Character:

- Open the InnerVoice app on your device and access "Face and Voice" in the settings.
- Customize the hero character to represent the individual's special interest or role model. Personalize the character's appearance and name. For Gary, it was the Angry Birds.

## 3. Adjust App Settings, Edit, and Arrange Buttons:

- InnerVoice offers a range of flexible options, including various sizes, emojis, GIFs, videos, and more, to craft the perfect Power eCard.
- Begin by creating a folder and populate it with buttons that outline the Power eCard scenario.
- Incorporate relevant images into the folder and buttons, drawing from InnerVoice's built-in image library of GIFs and emojis or by uploading your own pictures/videos.
- Once you've completed this step, simply press the Back button.

## 4. Save and Store Your Power eCard:

- Safeguard your finished Power eCard within the InnerVoice app. It will be stored conveniently within your project for easy access.

## 5. Export or Share Your Power eCard:

- You can export the Power eCard to store it on your own device or seamlessly share it with the intended recipient's device, thanks to InnerVoice's export and sharing options.

InnerVoice boasts has a user-friendly interface and customizable features, allowing you to create electronic Power eCards that align with individual preferences and requirements. These Power eCards serve as potent tools, capable of enriching communication, facilitating behavior management, and nurturing skill development.