

# Understanding the Misunderstood

Helping children with behavioral,  
social, and autism spectrum challenges

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## Shimmy's Story: Building Perspectives

I had such a hard day today. At recess, Rabbi punished me for getting into a fight with Chaim. Why does he always blame me for the fights and only listen to the other boys? It wasn't my fault! The other boys stepped on my stuff, and I was only defending myself. I hate when they step on my stuff. Rabbi said I should tell him when someone bothers me, but it doesn't help—when I do, he never punishes them anyway. So of course I need to do something to stop them. I have no friends. I wish I had at least one friend.

Shimmy is an active fifth grader. His *rebbe* tells me, “Shimmy is a very smart boy, however, he has a real problem. He is constantly fighting with other boys. I see him grabbing things from other boys and throwing their belongings. If someone mistakenly does something to him, he gets back at him. The boys complain to me all the time that Shimmy fights with them. I tried everything with Shimmy. I explained to him very clearly that the things he does annoy the other boys. Shimmy just denies it.”

This is common with children on the autism spectrum and those with other behavioral or social challenges. They have trouble seeing other people's perspectives

and thinking about their feelings. They may act in ways that alienate others and have trouble connecting the dots to learn that they need to be considerate of others if they want others to be considerate of them.

The first part of Rob Bernstein's approach is developing a strong and trusting connection with the child. Tapping into Shimmy's interests would be a good way to start. Once Shimmy would trust me and consider me an ally, he would be more willing to take guidance from me.

I learned from Shimmy that he likes to build things. I do too. I told Shimmy that I love woodworking and that I built many wood projects in my home. Shimmy was really interested.

“Why don't we work on a wood project together?” I said. Building a project together would serve as an opportunity to develop a relationship with Shimmy.

I suggested that we build a bookcase for his classroom. The next session, I brought Shimmy the pieces of wood to assemble the bookcase. Shimmy was overjoyed with the woodworking project and the tools I had brought.

The next step in Rob Bernstein's approach is using highly motivating activities as teaching opportunities. When children are

highly motivated and engaged, we can challenge and encourage them to go beyond their comfort zone. I planned with Rob various ways to use the wood project therapeutically to teach Shimmy to start considering other people.

Shimmy's difficulty with thinking about and considering

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others (in this case, me) was striking. He would grab things from my hand and bark orders at me to help him. After assembling the main structure for the bookcase, Shimmy was really proud of his handiwork and announced that he was going to keep the bookcase for himself!

Rob pointed out that for another child, it might be okay to allow him to change his mind and keep the bookcase, but Shimmy needed help overcoming an ego-centric mindset. Shimmy and I had planned to make the project together for his classroom. Now he was unilaterally deciding to keep it for himself, without even consulting me or taking me into account. I was going to challenge Shimmy on this and see if I could create for him a mind shift to consider my feelings.

Rob considers these situations to be pivotal teaching moments. Rather than looking at Shimmy's difficult behaviors as problematic and disruptive, we can view them as great teaching opportunities.

The next session, I challenged Shimmy, "I don't want you to keep the bookcase for yourself. We agreed that it's going to be for your classroom."

Shimmy immediately protested that he had worked hard on the project, so he should get it.

I then challenged Shimmy with my main point: "You don't care about me? What about me? I worked hard buying and cutting all the wood for the project."

Shimmy was having a hard time giving in, but he started to acknowledge that my feelings were also important.

I wasn't going to force Shimmy to give the bookcase to his classroom, since this specific behavior wasn't my goal. It would have been acceptable if he ended up keeping it, as long as he took my feelings into account and came up with a compromise such as paying something toward my expenses. My goal was to effect a change in his thinking pattern. This is an example of Rob Bernstein's cognitive approach—to work on the root underlying the difficult behaviors rather than change a specific behavior in a specific setting. For Shimmy, teaching him to

consider my feelings would lead him to think about his classmates' feelings too. Then, on his own, he would realize that he needs to reduce his aggressive behaviors toward them.

It was difficult for Shimmy not to take the bookcase for himself. We kept up the discussion about whom to give it to for the next few sessions as we continued building the bookcase. For the therapeutic benefit, the longer Shimmy

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insisted on keeping the bookcase for himself, the more opportunities I had to make the case for him to consider my feelings. Normally, Shimmy refused to discuss anything about thinking and considering other people's feelings. However, because of his strong desire to keep the bookcase, I was able to keep up the conversation and continue making the case that he needs to consider my feelings.

As therapy progressed with these and other similar teaching methods, Shimmy began improving his relationship with his classmates. He no longer antagonized them thoughtlessly, and when pro-

voked, he responded less aggressively. He continued making progress with his ABA therapist, and with time, he became more respectful and considerate of his therapist's feelings. These gains came as a result of an internal change in Shimmy's thinking. It was his decision to improve. We were just encouraging him in this process.

Menashe blamed me for knocking down his stuff today. I was about to get him back, but then Avromi came to my defense and said I didn't do it. I felt so good that another boy was sticking up for me that I decided to calm down and not do anything to Menashe.

Rather than implementing a behavior plan to improve specific behaviors in a specific setting, Shimmy was motivated internally to change. This resulted in genuine and lasting progress for Shimmy, which generalized to other areas of his life. ●

*Stories in this series are based on real accounts, but many details have been altered to protect the subjects' privacy.*



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Rob Bernstein has developed his cognitive-based approach for more than 30 years and is the author of the award-winning *Uniquely Normal: Tapping the Reservoir of Normalcy to Treat Autism* and *Uniquely Normal Manual: Using the Bernstein Cognitive Method for Autism*. He also runs the podcast "Uniquely Normal: A Rob Bernstein Podcast." Rob's mantra is "Let the child lead, and when they do, be ready to follow."